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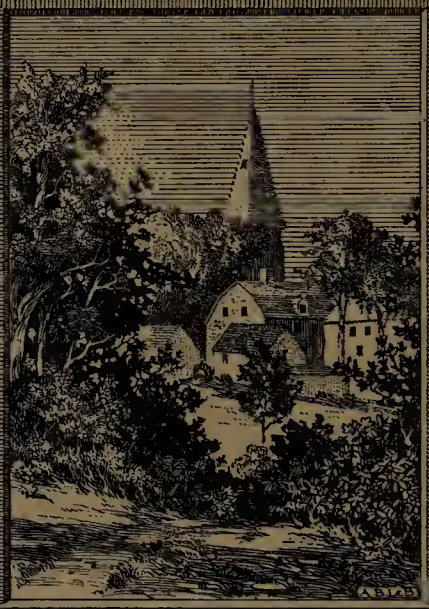

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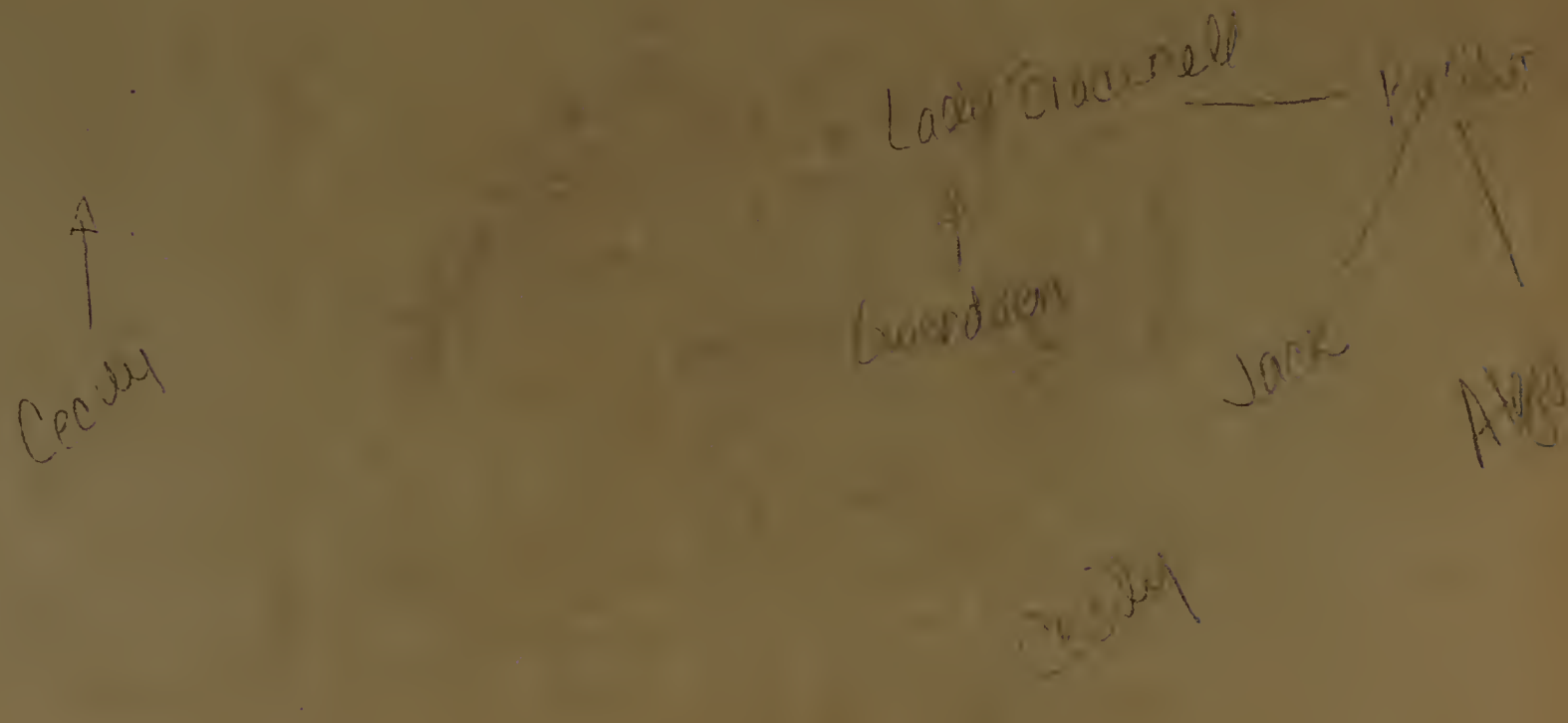

Cecily

Lady Cracknell

Gwendoen

Jack

Algy

Cecily

devoted [illegible]

Lord Marquis' son [illegible]

→ libel - but exposed guilt

THE
LARGE PAPER EDITION
OF
OSCAR WILDE

THE WRITINGS OF OSCAR WILDE

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST
AN IDEAL HUSBAND

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
JOHN DRINKWATER

VOLUME
VIII

NEW YORK
GABRIEL WELLS
1925

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INTRODUCTION

By JOHN DRINKWATER

It may sound wilful to say of a man who, more perhaps than any other of his generation, attacked the bourgeoisie with great if rather fantastic courage that his chief defect as an artist was want of taste. And yet, considering his work as a whole, that seems to be the truth about Oscar Wilde. He cared very much about art and said many brave and challenging things for it. He was preoccupied always with it, and as an artist himself he tried honourably to deal with an experience of life which, although it was turgid and forlorn, was real enough. Mere reality of experience, however, is not enough. Before he can create largely the artist must not only have his personal vitality of experience, but he must love that experience passionately, however dark its mood may be. In reading most of Wilde's poetry, all his plays but one, and his critical studies, one

feels, while all the time admiring a very rare executive gift, that here is a man who, for the most part, instead of standing bravely by his experience was trying to escape from it. This is not at all to suggest that he was a man lacking in common courage; few men have met disaster of fortune and temperament with so gallant a bearing. It is in a way easy for the protagonist in one of the great tragic movements of nature to meet fate fearlessly. But there is little enough of exaltation for the man who is destroyed not by passion but a merely trivial wasting of his own character. But, while Wilde did not lack courage of that kind, he was deficient in that other courage which makes the artist loyal to himself at whatever cost. If the artist cannot approach universal beauty surely through the channels of his own emotional life, he is certain to fall into cynicism or sentimentality, or both, and this is what Wilde did in most of his work. He was sensitive enough to the profound normal beauty of life, free play of character, charity, understanding, and the mystery of sacrifice. But he saw it all afar off, pathetically, as something which he cared for devotedly, but could not himself quite be out of the resources of his own nature. And so passion

is replaced by mere wistfulness, and the tragic realisation at which he aimed is continually sentimentalised. And at moments when the artist's awareness of this defect in himself left him with nothing but a forlorn sense that the beauty of which he knew so well was never quite truly his own, cynicism became his inevitable refuge. It is fair to say that this with Wilde did not happen often. As in the conduct of his own unhappy life, so in his art he did strive with courage towards what he knew to be the better reason. But the final issue remains that his work taken as a whole in its brilliance and pathos misses the profounder qualities of humour and passion, and it must be remembered that this was not by deliberate intention.

Once, however, Wilde's own nature, with all its limitations, worked clearly in delight of itself, and achieved what is in its own province a perfect work of art. "The Importance of Being Earnest" is not really a comedy of manners in the sense of being primarily a criticism of the follies into which a society is betrayed by its conventions, and a tearing off of the masks. Nor is it primarily a comedy of wit, sure and sustained as the wit is. Attempts have been made to derive

the play in some measure from the Restoration masters, but without much conviction, and while the manner employed by Wilde has clearly influenced some later writers, notably St. John Hankin, "The Importance of Being Earnest" really forms a class in English drama by itself. It is in mere simplicity that one says that it seems to be the only one of Wilde's works that really has its roots in passion. Every device of gaiety and even seeming nonsense is employed to keep the passion far back out of sight, and, if it were otherwise, the play would not be the masterpiece it is. But the passion is there. That is to say that the play is directly an expression of that part of Wilde's own experience which was least uncontaminated and in which he could take most delight. And this meant that all his great gifts as a craftsman were for once employed in work where, with insincerity almost as the theme, there was more sincerity than in anything else he did. Plays like "Salomé" and "The Florentine Tragedy" are at best little more than virtuosity, while "The Woman of no Importance", "Lady Windermere's Fan" and "The Ideal Husband," although they may have many of the qualities that mark Wilde's one great achievement, are on the

whole frank surrenders to a fashion of the theatre which Wilde had too good a brain not to despise. But in "The Importance of Being Earnest" there is neither virtuosity nor concession. It is a superb and original piece of construction, with several moments of stage mastery which can hardly be excelled in comedy, and packed throughout with a perfect understanding of dramatic speech. One has only to recall any scene in the play and place it beside almost any of the successful comedies that one sees in the ordinary run of theatre production, to see how definitely apart that greatness is set which comes of having not three words in seven dramatically right but seven in seven. But when art comes to this excellence of form it can only mean excellence of life at the springs, and flowing through "The Importance of Being Earnest" is the surest and clearest part of Wilde's life. There was much, perhaps everything, in the more profoundly moving story of man that Wilde saw always imperfectly or not at all. But he did see, with a sublety that can hardly be matched in our dramatic literature, that the common intrigues of daily life are not really the moralist's province at all, but interesting only for the sheer amusement that can be got out of them. Shakespeare

gave to the English stage a comedy as full of poetic passion as great tragic art, Ben Jonson the comedy of humours, and Congreve and his fellows the true comedy of manners, but Wilde in his one masterpiece brought into the same company of excellence the comedy of pure fun.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

TO

ROBERT BALDWIN ROSS

IN APPRECIATION AND
AFFECTION

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY.

JOHN WORTHING, J. P.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D. D.

MERRIMAN, Butler

LANE, Manservant

LADY BRACKNELL

HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

CECILY CARDEW

MISS PRISM, Governess

Lady Bracknell unpressed

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY.

ACT I *Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half-Moon Street, W.*

ACT II *The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.*

ACT III *Drawing-Room at the Manor House, Woolton.*

Time

The Present.

FIRST ACT.

SCENE—*Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room.*

[*Lane is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, Algernon enters.*]

ALGERNON

Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE

I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON

I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE

Yes, sir.

ALGERNON

And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

LANE

Yes, sir. [*Hands them on a salver.*]

ALGERNON

[*Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.*] Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE

Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON

Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

LANE

I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON

Good Heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?

LANE

I believe it *is* a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON

[*Languidly.*] I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE

No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

ALGERNON

Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE

Thank you, sir. [*Lane goes out.*]

ALGERNON

Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

[*Enter Lane.*]

LANE

Mr. Ernest Worthing.

[*Enter Jack.*] [*Lane goes out.*]

ALGERNON

How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK

Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

ALGERNON

[*Stiffly.*] I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five

o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

JACK

[*Sitting down on the sofa.*] In the country.

ALGERNON

What on earth do you do there?

JACK

[*Pulling off his gloves.*] When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

ALGERNON

And who are the people you amuse?

JACK

[*Airily.*] Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

ALGERNON

Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

JACK

Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

ALGERNON

How immensely you must amuse them! [*Goes over and takes sandwich.*] By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?

JACK

Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

ALGERNON

Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK

How perfectly delightful!

ALGERNON

Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

JACK

May I ask why?

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwen-

dolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

JACK

I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

ALGERNON

I thought you had come up for pleasure? . . . I call that business.

JACK

How utterly unromantic you are!

ALGERNON

I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK

I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

ALGERNON

Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven—— [*Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich. Algernon at once interferes.*] Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [*Takes one and eats it.*]

JACK

Well, you have been eating them all the time.

ALGERNON

That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. [*Takes plate from below.*] Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

JACK

[*Advancing to table and helping himself.*] And very good bread and butter it is too.

ALGERNON

Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not

married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

JACK

Why on earth do you say that?

ALGERNON

Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

JACK

Oh, that is nonsense!

ALGERNON

It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent.

JACK

Your consent!

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. [*Rings bell.*]

JACK

Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily? I don't know anyone of the name of Cecily.

[*Enter Lane.*]

ALGERNON

Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here.

LANE

Yes, sir. [*Lane goes out.*]

JACK

Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

ALGERNON

Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up.

JACK

There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

[*Enter Lane with the cigarette case on a salver. Algernon takes it at once. Lane goes out.*]

ALGERNON

I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. [*Opens case and examines it.*] However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK

Of course it's mine. [*Moving to him.*] You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

ALGERNON

Oh! it is absurd to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

JACK

I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort

of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

ALGERNON

Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.

JACK

Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON

Your aunt!

JACK

Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells. Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON

[*Retreating to back of sofa.*] But why does she call herself Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? [*Reading.*] "From little Cecily with her fondest love."

JACK

[*Moving to sofa and kneeling upon it.*] My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that?

Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. [*Follows Algy round the room.*]

ALGERNON

Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack." There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK

It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

ALGERNON

You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest looking person I ever saw in my life. It is per-

fectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. [*Taking it from case.*] "Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany." I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else. [*Puts the card in his pocket.*]

JACK

Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

ALGERNON

Yes, but that does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Cecily, who lives at Tunbridge Wells, calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out at once.

JACK

My dear Algy, you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression.

ALGERNON

Well, that is exactly what dentists always do.

Now, go on! Tell me the whole thing. I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now.

JACK

Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

ALGERNON

I'll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

JACK

Well, produce my cigarette case first.

ALGERNON

Here it is. [*Hands cigarette case.*] Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable. [*Sits on sofa.*]

JACK

My dear fellow, there is nothing improbable about my explanation at all. In fact it's perfectly ordinary. Old Mr. Thomas Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in

his will guardian to his grand-daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle from motives of respect that you could not possibly appreciate, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism.

ALGERNON

Where is that place in the country, by the way?

JACK

That is nothing to you, dear boy. You are not going to be invited. . . . I may tell you candidly that the place is not in Shropshire.

ALGERNON

I suspected that, my dear fellow! I have Bunburyed all over Shropshire on two separate occasions. Now, go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

JACK

My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a

very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON

The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

JACK

That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.

ALGERNON

Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers. What you really are is a Bunburyist. I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.

JACK

What on earth do you mean?

ALGERNON

You have invented a very useful young brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.

JACK

I haven't asked you to dine with me anywhere to-night.

ALGERNON

I know. You are absurdly careless about sending out invitations. It is very foolish of you. Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations.

JACK

You had much better dine with your Aunt Augusta.

ALGERNON

I haven't the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. To begin with, I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one's own relations. In the second place, whenever I do dine there I am always treated as a member of the family, and sent down with either no woman at all, or two. In the third place, I know perfectly well whom she will place me next to, to-night. She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent . . . and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist, I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules.

JACK

I'm not a Bunburyist at all. If Gwendolen accepts me, I am going to kill my brother, indeed I think I'll kill him in any case. Cecily is a little too much interested in him. It is rather a bore. So I am going to get rid of Ernest. And I strongly advise you to do the same with Mr. . . . with your invalid friend who has the absurd name.

ALGERNON

Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

JACK

That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

ALGERNON

Then your wife will. You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none.

JACK

[*Sententiously.*] That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the corrupt French Drama has been propounding for the last fifty years.

ALGERNON

Yes; and that the happy English home has proved in half the time.

JACK

For heaven's sake, don't try to be cynical. It's perfectly easy to be cynical.

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, it isn't easy to be anything now-a-days. There's such a lot of beastly competition about. [*The sound of an electric bell is heard.*] Ah! that must be Aunt Augusta. Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner. Now, if I get her out of the way for ten minutes, so that you can have an opportunity for proposing to Gwendolen, may I dine with you to-night at Willis's?

JACK

I suppose so, if you want to.

ALGERNON

Yes, but you must be serious about it. I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.

[*Enter Lane.*]

LANE

Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax.

[*Algernon goes forward to meet them. Enter Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.

ALGERNON

I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together. [*Sees Jack and bows to him with icy coldness.*]

ALGERNON

[*To Gwendolen.*] Dear me, you are smart!

GWENDOLEN

I am always smart! Aren't I, Mr. Worthing?

JACK

You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions. [*Gwendolen and Jack sit down together in the corner.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

I'm sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.

ALGERNON

Certainly, Aunt Augusta. [*Goes over to tea-table.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

Won't you come and sit here, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN

Thanks, mamma, I'm quite comfortable where I am.

ALGERNON

[*Picking up empty plate in horror.*] Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

LANE

[*Gravely.*] There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice.

ALGERNON

No cucumbers!

LANE

No, sir. Not even for ready money.

ALGERNON

That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE

Thank you, sir.

ALGERNON

I am greatly distressed, Aunt Augusta, about there being no cucumbers, not even for ready money.

LADY BRACKNELL

It really makes no matter, Algernon. I had

some crumpets with Lady Harbury, who seems to me to be living entirely for pleasure now.

ALGERNON

I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.

LADY BRACKNELL

It certainly has changed its colour. From what cause I, of course, cannot say. [*Algernon crosses and hands tea.*] Thank you. I've quite a treat for you to-night, Algernon. I am going to send you down with Mary Farquhar. She is such a nice woman, and so attentive to her husband. It's delightful to watch them.

ALGERNON

I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you to-night after all.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Frowning.*] I hope not, Algernon. It would put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that.

ALGERNON

It is a great bore, and, I need hardly say, a terrible disappointment to me, but the fact is I have just had a telegram to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. [*Exchanges glances with Jack.*] They seem to think I should be with him.

LADY BRACKNELL

It is very strange. This Mr. Bunbury seems to suffer from curiously bad health.

ALGERNON

Yes; poor Bunbury is a dreadful invalid.

LADY BRACKNELL

Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life. I am always telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take much notice . . . as far as any improvement in his ailments goes. I

should be obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me. It is my last reception, and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.

ALGERNON

I'll speak to Bunbury, Aunt Augusta, if he is still conscious, and I think I can promise you he'll be all right by Saturday. Of course the music is a great difficulty. You see, if one plays good music, people don't listen, and if one plays bad music, people don't talk. But I'll run over the programme I've drawn out, if you will kindly come into the next room for a moment.

LADY BRACKNELL

Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you. [*Rising, and following Algernon.*] I'm sure the programme will be delightful, after a few expurgations. French songs I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think

that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe is so. Gwendolen, you will accompany me.

GWENDOLEN

Certainly, mamma.

[*Lady Bracknell and Algernon go into the music-room, Gwendolen remains behind.*]

JACK

Charming day it has been, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

Pray don't talk to me about the weather, Mr. Worthing. Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else. And that makes me so nervous.

JACK

I do mean something else.

GWENDOLEN

I thought so. In fact, I am never wrong.

JACK

And I would like to be allowed to take advantage of Lady Bracknell's temporary absence . . .

GWENDOLEN

I would certainly advise you to do so. Mamma has a way of coming back suddenly into a room that I have often had to speak to her about.

JACK

[*Nervously.*] Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you I have admired you more than any girl . . . I have ever met since . . . I met you.

GWENDOLEN

Yes, I am quite aware of the fact. And I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative. For me you have always had an irresistible fascination. Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. [*Jack looks at her in amazement.*] We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told: and my ideal has always been to love some one

of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.

JACK

You really love me, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN

Passionately!

JACK

Darling! You don't know how happy you've made me.

GWENDOLEN

My own Ernest!

JACK

But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

GWENDOLEN

But your name is Ernest.

JACK

Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was

something else? Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then?

GWENDOLEN

[*Glibly.*] Ah! that is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them.

JACK

Personally, darling, to speak quite candidly, I don't much care about the name of Ernest . . . I don't think the name suits me at all.

GWENDOLEN

It suits you perfectly. It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations.

JACK

Well, really, Gwendolen, I must say that I think there are lots of other much nicer names. I think Jack, for instance, a charming name.

GWENDOLEN

Jack? . . . No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations.

. . . I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment's solitude. The only really safe name is Ernest.

JACK

Gwendolen, I must get christened at once—I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.

GWENDOLEN

Married, Mr. Worthing?

JACK

[*Astounded.*] Well . . . surely. You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.

GWENDOLEN

I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.

JACK

Well . . . may I propose to you now?

GWENDOLEN

I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.

JACK

Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN

Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?

JACK

You know what I have got to say to you.

GWENDOLEN

Yes, but you don't say it.

JACK

Gwendolen, will you marry me? [*Goes on his knees.*]

GWENDOLEN

Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

JACK

My own one, I have never loved anyone in the world but you.

GWENDOLEN

Yes, but men often propose for practice. I know my brother Gerald does. All my girl-friends tell me so. What wonderfully blue eyes you have, Ernest! They are quite, quite blue. I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present.

[*Enter Lady Bracknell.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

Mr. Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

GWENDOLEN

Mamma! [*He tries to rise; she restrains him.*] I must beg you to retire. This is no place for you. Besides, Mr. Worthing has not quite finished yet.

LADY BRACKNELL

Finished what, may I ask?

GWENDOLEN

I am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma. [*They rise together.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself. . . . And now I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage.

GWENDOLEN

[*Reproachfully.*] Mamma!

LADY BRACKNELL

In the carriage, Gwendolen! [*Gwendolen goes to the door. She and Jack blow kisses to each other behind Lady Bracknell's back. Lady*

Bracknell looks vaguely about as if she could not understand what the noise was. Finally turns round.] Gwendolen, the carriage!

GWENDOLEN

Yes, mamma. [*Goes out, looking back at Jack.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Sitting down.*] You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing.

[*Looks in her pocket for note-book and pencil.*]

JACK

Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Pencil and note-book in hand.*] I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke!

JACK

Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

LADY BRACKNELL

I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?

JACK

Twenty-nine.

LADY BRACKNELL

A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

JACK

[*After some hesitation.*] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. For-

tunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income?

JACK

Between seven and eight thousand a year.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Makes a note in her book.*] In land, or in *investments?*

JACK

In investments, chiefly.

LADY BRACKNELL

That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.

JACK

I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe; but I don't depend on that for

my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it.

LADY BRACKNELL

A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

JACK

Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham. Of course, I can get it back whenever I like, at six months' notice.

LADY BRACKNELL

Lady Bloxham? I don't know her.

JACK

Oh, she goes about very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.

LADY BRACKNELL

Ah, now-a-days that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?

JACK

149.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Shaking her head.*] The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.

JACK

Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Sternly.*] Both, if necessary, I presume. What are your politics?

JACK

Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.

LADY BRACKNELL

Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

JACK

I have lost both my parents.

LADY BRACKNELL

Both? . . . That seems like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of aristocracy?

S.C.

JACK

I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me. . . . I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was . . . well, I was found.

LADY BRACKNELL

Found!

JACK

The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort.

LADY BRACKNELL

Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?

JACK

[*Gravely.*] In a hand-bag.

LADY BRACKNELL

A hand-bag?

JACK

[*Very seriously.*] Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag—a somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it—an ordinary hand-bag, in fact.

LADY BRACKNELL

In what locality did this Mr. James, or Thomas, Cardew come across this ordinary hand-bag?

JACK

In the cloak-room at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

LADY BRACKNELL

The cloak-room at Victoria Station?

JACK

Yes. The Brighton line.

LADY BRACKNELL

The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate, bred in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that remind one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion—has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now—but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognised position in good society.

JACK

May I ask you then what you would advise me to do? I need hardly say I would do anything in the world to ensure Gwendolen's happiness.

LADY BRACKNELL

I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing,

to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

JACK

Well, I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the hand-bag at any moment. It is in my dressing-room at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

Me, sir! What has it to do with me? You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel? Good morning, Mr. Worthing!

[*Lady Bracknell sweeps out in majestic indignation.*]

JACK

Good morning! [*Algernon, from the other room, strikes up the Wedding March. Jack looks perfectly furious, and goes to the door.*] For

goodness' sake don't play that ghastly tune, Algy! How idiotic you are!

[*The music stops, and Algernon enters cheerily.*]

ALGERNON

Didn't it go off all right, old boy? You don't mean to say Gwendolen refused you? I know it is a way she has. She is always refusing people. I think it is most ill-natured of her.

JACK

Oh, Gwendolen is as right as a trivet. As far as she is concerned, we are engaged. Her mother is perfectly unbearable. Never met such a Gorgon . . . I don't really know what a Gorgon is like, but I am quite sure that Lady Bracknell is one. In any case, she is a monster, without being a myth, which is rather unfair . . . I beg your pardon, Algy, I suppose I shouldn't talk about your own aunt in that way before you.

ALGERNON

My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all. Relations are simply a tedious pack of people who haven't got the

remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die.

JACK

Oh, that is nonsense!

ALGERNON

It isn't!

JACK

Well, I won't argue about the matter. You always want to argue about things.

ALGERNON

That is exactly what things were originally made for.

JACK

Upon my word, if I thought that, I'd shoot myself . . . [*A pause.*] You don't think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?

ALGERNON

All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.

JACK

Is that clever?

ALGERNON

It is perfectly phrased! and quite as true as any observation in civilized life should be.

JACK

I am sick to death of cleverness. Everybody is clever now-a-days. You can't go anywhere without meeting clever people. The thing has become an absolute public nuisance. I wish to goodness we had a few fools left.

ALGERNON

We have.

JACK

I should extremely like to meet them. What do they talk about?

ALGERNON

The fools? Oh! about the clever people, of course.

JACK

What fools!

ALGERNON

By the way, did you tell Gwendolen the truth about your being Ernest in town, and Jack in the country?

JACK

[*In a very patronising manner.*] My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice sweet refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!

ALGERNON

The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to someone else if she is plain.

JACK

Oh, that is nonsense.

ALGERNON

What about your brother? What about the profligate Ernest?

JACK

Oh, before the end of the week I shall have got rid of him. I'll say he died in Paris of

apoplexy. Lots of people die of apoplexy, quite suddenly, don't they?

ALGERNON

Yes, but it's hereditary, my dear fellow. It's a sort of thing that runs in families. You had much better say a severe chill.

JACK

You are sure a severe chill isn't hereditary, or anything of that kind?

ALGERNON

Of course it isn't!

JACK

Very well, then. My poor brother Ernest is carried off suddenly in Paris, by a severe chill. That gets rid of him.

ALGERNON

But I thought you said that . . . Miss Cardew was a little too much interested in your poor brother Ernest? Won't she feel his loss a good deal?

JACK

Oh, that is all right. Cecily is not a silly

romantic girl, I am glad to say. She has got a capital appetite, goes on long walks, and pays no attention at all to her lessons.

ALGERNON

I would rather like to see Cecily.

JACK

I will take very good care you never do. She is excessively pretty, and she is only just eighteen.

ALGERNON

Have you told Gwendolen yet that you have an excessively pretty ward who is only just eighteen?

JACK

Oh! one doesn't blurt these things out to people. Cecily and Gwendolen are perfectly certain to be extremely great friends. I'll bet you anything you like that half an hour after they have met, they will be calling each other sister.

ALGERNON

Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first. Now, my

dear boy, if we want to get a good table at Willis's, we really must go and dress. Do you know it is nearly seven?

JACK

[*Irritably.*] Oh! it always is nearly seven.

ALGERNON

Well, I'm hungry.

JACK

I never knew you when you weren't. . . .

ALGERNON

What shall we do after dinner? Go to the theatre?

JACK

Oh no! I loathe listening.

ALGERNON

Well, let us go to the club?

JACK

Oh, no! I hate talking.

ALGERNON

Well, we might trot round to the Empire at ten?

JACK

Oh no! I can't bear looking at things. It is so silly.

ALGERNON

Well, what shall we do?

JACK

Nothing!

ALGERNON

It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind.

[*Enter Lane.*]

LANE

Miss Fairfax.

[*Enter Gwendolen. Lane goes out.*]

ALGERNON

Gwendolen, upon my word!

GWENDOLEN

Algy, kindly turn your back. I have something very particular to say to Mr. Worthing.

ALGERNON

Really, Gwendolen, I don't think I can allow this at all.

GWENDOLEN

Algy, you always adopt a strictly immoral attitude towards life. You are not quite old enough to do that. [*Algernon retires to the fireplace.*]

JACK

My own darling!

GWENDOLEN

Ernest, we may never be married. From the expression on mamma's face I fear we never shall. Few parents now-a-days pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out. Whatever influence I ever had over mamma, I lost at the age of three. But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else, and marry often, nothing that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you.

JACK

Dear Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN

The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibres of my nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me. Your town address at the Albany I have. What is your address in the country?

JACK

The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire.

[*Algernon, who has been carefully listening, smiles to himself, and writes the address on his shirt-cuff. Then picks up the Railway Guide.*]

GWENDOLEN

There is a good postal service, I suppose? It may be necessary to do something desperate. That of course will require serious consideration. I will communicate with you daily.

JACK

My own one!

GWENDOLEN

How long do you remain in town?

JACK

Till Monday.

GWENDOLEN

Good! Algy, you may turn round now.

ALGERNON

Thanks, I've turned round already.

GWENDOLEN

You may also ring the bell.

JACK

You will let me see you to your carriage, my own darling?

GWENDOLEN

Certainly.

JACK

[*To Lane, who now enters.*] I will see Miss Fairfax out.

LANE

Yes, sir. [*Jack and Gwendolen go off.*]

[*Lane presents several letters on a salver to Algernon. It is to be surmised that they are bills, as Algernon after looking at the envelopes, tears them up.*]

ALGERNON

A glass of sherry, Lane.

LANE

Yes, sir.

ALGERNON

To-morrow, Lane, I'm going Bunburying.

LANE

Yes, sir.

ALGERNON

I shall probably not be back till Monday. You can put up my dress clothes, my smoking jacket, and all the Bunbury suits . . .

LANE

Yes, sir. [*Handing sherry.*]

ALGERNON

I hope to-morrow will be a fine day, Lane.

LANE

It never is, sir.

ALGERNON

Lane, you're a perfect pessimist.

LANE

I do my best to give satisfaction, sir.

[*Enter Jack. Lane goes off.*]

JACK

There's a sensible, intellectual girl! the only girl I ever cared for in my life. [*Algernon is laughing immoderately.*] What on earth are you so amused at?

ALGERNON

Oh, I'm a little anxious about poor Bunbury, that is all.

JACK

If you don't take care, your friend Bunbury will get you into a serious scrape some day.

ALGERNON

I love scrapes. They are the only things that are never serious.

JACK

Oh, that's nonsense, Algy. You never talk anything but nonsense.

ALGERNON

Nobody ever does.

[*Jack looks indignantly at him, and leaves the room. Algernon lights a cigarette, reads his shirt-cuff, and smiles.*]

ACT-DROP.

SECOND ACT.

SCENE—*Garden at the Manor House. A flight of gray stone steps leads up to the house. The garden, an old-fashioned one, full of roses. Time of year, July. Basket chairs, and a table covered with books, are set under a large yew tree.*

[*Miss Prism discovered seated at the table. Cecily is at the back watering flowers.*]

MISS PRISM

[*Calling.*] Cecily, Cecily! Surely such a utilitarian occupation as the watering of flowers is rather Moulton's duty than yours? Especially at a moment when intellectual pleasures await you. Your German grammar is on the table. Pray open it at page fifteen. We will repeat yesterday's lesson.

CECILY

[*Coming over very slowly.*] But I don't like

German. It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson.

MISS PRISM

Child, you know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself in every way. He laid particular stress on your German, as he was leaving for town yesterday. Indeed, he always lays stress on your German when he is leaving for town.

CECILY

Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well.

MISS PRISM

[*Drawing herself up.*] Your guardian enjoys the best of health, and his gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is. I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility.

CECILY

I suppose that is why he often looks a little bored when we three are together.

MISS PRISM

Cecily! I am surprised at you. Mr. Worthing has many troubles in his life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man his brother.

CECILY

I wish Uncle Jack would allow that unfortunate young man, his brother, to come down here sometimes. We might have a good influence over him, Miss Prism. I am sure you certainly would. You know German, and geology, and things of that kind influence a man very much. [*Cecily begins to write in her diary.*]

MISS PRISM

[*Shaking her head.*] I do not think that even I could produce any effect on a character that according to his own brother's admission is irretrievably weak and vacillating. Indeed I am not sure that I would desire to reclaim him. I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice. As a man sows so let him reap. You

must put away your diary, Cecily. I really don't see why you should keep a diary at all.

CECILY

I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down I should probably forget all about them.

MISS PRISM

Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us.

CECILY

Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us.

MISS PRISM

Do not speak slightingly of the three-volume novel, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days.

CECILY

Did you really, Miss Prism? How wonderfully clever you are! I hope it did not end

happily? I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much.

MISS PRISM

The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.

CECILY

I suppose so. But it seems very unfair. And was your novel ever published?

MISS PRISM

Alas! no. The manuscript unfortunately was abandoned. I use the word in the sense of lost or mislaid. To your work, child, these speculations are profitless.

CECILY

[*Smiling.*] But I see dear Dr. Chasuble coming up through the garden.

MISS PRISM

[*Rising and advancing.*] Dr. Chasuble! This is indeed a pleasure.

[*Enter Canon Chasuble.*]

CHASUBLE

And how are we this morning? Miss Prism, you are, I trust, well?

CECILY

Miss Prism has just been complaining of a slight headache. I think it would do her so much good to have a short stroll with you in the Park, Dr. Chasuble.

MISS PRISM

Cecily, I have not mentioned anything about a headache.

CECILY

No, dear Miss Prism, I know that, but I felt instinctively that you had a headache. Indeed I was thinking about that, and not about my German lesson, when the Rector came in.

CHASUBLE

I hope Cecily, you are not inattentive.

CECILY

Oh, I am afraid I am.

CHASUBLE

That is strange. Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips. [*Miss Prism glares.*] I spoke metaphorically.—My metaphor was drawn from bees.

Ahem! Mr. Worthing I suppose, has not returned from town yet?

MISS PRISM

We do not expect him till Monday afternoon.

CHASUBLE

Ah yes, he usually likes to spend his Sunday in London. He is not one of those whose sole aim is enjoyment, as, by all accounts, that unfortunate young man his brother seems to be. But I must not disturb Egeria and her pupil any longer.

MISS PRISM

Egeria? My name is Lætitia, Doctor.

CHASUBLE

[*Bowing.*] A classical allusion merely, drawn from the Pagan authors. I shall see you both no doubt at Evensong?

MISS PRISM

I think, dear Doctor, I will have a stroll with you. I find I have a headache after all, and a walk might do it good.

CHASUBLE

With pleasure, Miss Prism, with pleasure. We might go as far as the schools and back.

MISS PRISM

That would be delightful. Cecily, you will read your Political Economy in my absence. The chapter on the Fall of the Rupee you may omit. It is somewhat too sensational. Even these metallic problems have their melodramatic side.

[*Goes down the garden with Dr. Chasuble.*]

CECILY

[*Picks up books and throws them back on table.*] Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!

[*Enter Merriman with a card on a salver.*]

MERRIMAN

Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station. He has brought his luggage with him.

CECILY

[*Takes the card and reads it.*] "Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4 The Albany, W." Uncle Jack's

brother! Did you tell him Mr. Worthing was in town?

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss. He seemed very much disappointed. I mentioned that you and Miss Prism were in the garden. He said he was anxious to speak to you privately for a moment.

CECILY

Ask Mr. Ernest Worthing to come here. I suppose you had better talk to the housekeeper about a room for him.

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss. [*Merriman goes off.*]

CECILY

I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am so afraid he will look just like everyone else.

[*Enter Algernon, very gay and debonair.*]

He does!

ALGERNON

[*Raising his hat.*] You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure.

CECILY

You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age. [*Algernon is rather taken aback.*] But I am your cousin Cecily. You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest.

ALGERNON

Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn't think that I am wicked.

CECILY

If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

ALGERNON

[*Looks at her in amazement.*] Oh! Of course I have been rather reckless.

CECILY

I am glad to hear it.

ALGERNON

In fact, now you mention the subject, I have been very bad in my own small way.

CECILY

I don't think you should be so proud of that, though I am sure it must have been very pleasant.

ALGERNON

It is much pleasanter being here with you.

CECILY

I can't understand how you are here at all. Uncle Jack won't be back till Monday afternoon.

ALGERNON

That is a great disappointment. I am obliged to go up by the first train on Monday morning. I have a business appointment that I am anxious . . . to miss.

CECILY

Couldn't you miss it anywhere but in London?

ALGERNON

No: the appointment is in London.

CECILY

Well, I know, of course, how important it is not to keep a business engagement, if one wants to retain any sense of the beauty of life, but still I think you had better wait till Uncle Jack arrives. I know he wants to speak to you about your emigrating.

ALGERNON

About my what?

CECILY

Your emigrating. He has gone up to buy your outfit.

ALGERNON

I certainly wouldn't let Jack buy my outfit. He has no taste in neckties at all.

CECILY

I don't think you will require neckties. Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia.

ALGERNON

Australia? I'd sooner die.

CECILY

Well, he said at dinner on Wednesday night,

that you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia.

ALGERNON

Oh, well! The accounts I have received of Australia and the next world are not particularly encouraging. This world is good enough for me, cousin Cecily.

CECILY

Yes, but are you good enough for it?

ALGERNON

I'm afraid I'm not that. That is why I want you to reform me. You might make that your mission, if you don't mind, cousin Cecily.

CECILY

I'm afraid I've no time, this afternoon.

ALGERNON

Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?

CECILY

It is rather Quixotic of you. But I think you should try.

ALGERNON

I will. I feel better already.

CECILY

You are looking a little worse.

ALGERNON

That is because I am hungry.

CECILY

How thoughtless of me. I should have remembered that when one is going to lead an entirely new life, one requires regular and wholesome meals. Won't you come in?

ALGERNON

Thank you. Might I have a button-hole first? I never have any appetite unless I have a button-hole first.

CECILY

A Maréchale Niel? [*Picks up scissors.*]

ALGERNON

No, I'd sooner have a pink rose.

CECILY

Why? [*Cuts a flower.*]

ALGERNON

Because you are like a pink rose, cousin Cecily.

CECILY

I don't think it can be right for you to talk to me like that. Miss Prism never says such things to me.

ALGERNON

Then Miss Prism is a short-sighted old lady. [*Cecily puts the rose in his button-hole.*] You are the prettiest girl I ever saw.

CECILY

Miss Prism says that all good looks are a snare.

ALGERNON

They are a snare that every sensible man would like to be caught in.

CECILY

Oh! I don't think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn't know what to talk to him about.

[*They pass into the house. Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return.*]

MISS PRISM

You are too much alone, dear Dr. Chasuble. You should get married. A misanthrope I can understand—a womanthrope, never!

CHASUBLE

[*With a scholar's shudder.*] Believe me, I do not deserve so neologistic a phrase. The precept as well as the practice of the Primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony.

MISS PRISM

[*Sententiously.*] That is obviously the reason why the Primitive Church has not lasted up to the present day. And you do not seem to realize, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. Men should be more careful; this very celibacy leads weaker vessels astray.

CHASUBLE

But is a man not equally attractive when married?

MISS PRISM

No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.

CHASUBLE

And often, I've been told, not even to her.

MISS PRISM

That depends on the intellectual sympathies of the woman. Maturity can always be depended on. Ripeness can be trusted. Young women are green. [*Dr. Chasuble starts.*] I spoke horticulturally. My metaphor was drawn from fruits. But where is Cecily?

CHASUBLE

Perhaps she followed us to the schools.

[*Enter Jack slowly from the back of the garden. He is dressed in the deepest mourning, with crape hat-band and black gloves.*]

MISS PRISM

Mr. Worthing!

CHASUBLE

Mr. Worthing?

MISS PRISM

This is indeed a surprise. We did not look for you till Monday afternoon.

JACK

[*Shakes Miss Prism's hand in a tragic manner.*] I have returned sooner than I expected. Dr. Chasuble, I hope you are well?

CHASUBLE

Dear Mr. Worthing, I trust this garb of woe does not betoken some terrible calamity?

JACK

My brother.

MISS PRISM

More shameful debts and extravagance?

CHASUBLE

Still leading his life of pleasure?

JACK

[*Shaking his head.*] Dead!

CHASUBLE

Your brother Ernest dead?

JACK

Quite dead.

MISS PRISM

What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it.

CHASUBLE

Mr. Worthing, I offer you my sincere condolence. You have at least the consolation of knowing that you were always the most generous and forgiving of brothers.

JACK

Poor Ernest! He had many faults, but it is a sad, sad blow.

CHASUBLE

Very sad indeed. Were you with him at the end?

JACK

No. He died abroad; in Paris, in fact. I had a telegram last night from the manager of the Grand Hotel.

CHASUBLE

Was the cause of death mentioned?

JACK

A severe chill, it seems.

MISS PRISM

As a man sows, so shall he reap.

CHASUBLE

[*Raising his hand.*] Charity, dear Miss Prism, charity! None of us are perfect. I myself am peculiarly susceptible to draughts. Will the interment take place here?

JACK

No. He seemed to have expressed a desire to be buried in Paris.

CHASUBLE

In Paris! [*Shakes his head.*] I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last. You would no doubt wish me to make some slight allusion to this tragic domestic affliction next Sunday. [*Jack presses his hand convulsively.*] My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing. [*All sigh.*] I have preached it at harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmations, on days of humiliation and festal days. The last time I delivered it was in the Cathedral, as a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for

the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders. The Bishop, who was present, was much struck by some of the analogies I drew.

JACK

Ah! that reminds me, you mentioned christenings, I think, Dr. Chasuble? I suppose you know how to christen all right? [*Dr. Chasuble looks astounded.*] I mean, of course, you are continually christening, aren't you?

MISS PRISM

It is, I regret to say, one of the Rector's most constant duties in this parish. I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject. But they don't seem to know what thrift is.

CHASUBLE

But is there any particular infant in whom you are interested, Mr. Worthing? Your brother was, I believe, unmarried, was he not?

JACK

Oh yes.

MISS PRISM

[*Bitterly.*] People who live entirely for pleasure usually are.

JACK

But it is not for any child, dear Doctor. I am very fond of children. No! the fact is, I would like to be christened myself, this afternoon, if you have nothing better to do.

CHASUBLE

But surely, Mr. Worthing, you have been christened already?

JACK

I don't remember anything about it.

CHASUBLE

But have you any grave doubts on the subject?

JACK

I certainly intend to have. Of course I don't know if the thing would bother you in any way, or if you think I am a little too old now.

CHASUBLE

Not at all. The sprinkling, and, indeed, the immersion of adults is a perfectly canonical practice.

JACK

Immersion!

CHASUBLE

You need have no apprehensions. Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed I think advisable. Our weather is so changeable. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed?

JACK

Oh, I might trot round about five if that would suit you.

CHASUBLE

Perfectly, perfectly! In fact I have two similar ceremonies to perform at that time. A case of twins that occurred recently in one of the outlying cottages on your own estate. Poor Jenkins the carter, a most hard-working man.

JACK

Oh! I don't see much fun in being christened along with other babies. It would be childish. Would half-past five do?

CHASUBLE

Admirably! Admirably! [*Takes out watch.*]

And now, dear Mr. Worthing, I will not intrude any longer into a house of sorrow. I would merely beg you not to be too much bowed down by grief. What seem to us bitter trials are often blessings in disguise.

MISS PRISM

This seems to me a blessing of an extremely obvious kind.

[*Enter Cecily from the house.*]

CECILY

Uncle Jack! Oh, I am pleased to see you back. But what horrid clothes you have got on! Do go and change them.

MISS PRISM

Cecily!

CHASUBLE

My child! my child! [*Cecily goes towards Jack; he kisses her brow in a melancholy manner.*]

CECILY

What is the matter, Uncle Jack? Do look happy! You look as if you had toothache, and

I have got such a surprise for you. Who do you think is in the dining-room? Your brother!

JACK

Who?

CECILY

Your brother Ernest. He arrived about half an hour ago.

JACK

What nonsense! I haven't got a brother!

CECILY

Oh, don't say that. However badly he may have behaved to you in the past he is still your brother. You couldn't be so heartless as to disown him. I'll tell him to come out. And you will shake hands with him, won't you, Uncle Jack? [*Runs back into the house.*]

CHASUBLE

These are very joyful tidings.

MISS PRISM

After we had all been resigned to his loss, his sudden return seems to me peculiarly distressing.

JACK

My brother is in the dining-room? I don't know what it all means. I think it is perfectly absurd.

[*Enter Algernon and Cecily hand in hand. They come slowly up to Jack.*]

JACK

Good heavens! [*Motions Algernon away.*]

ALGERNON

Brother John, I have come down from town to tell you that I am very sorry for all the trouble I have given you, and that I intend to lead a better life in the future. [*Jack glares at him and does not take his hand.*]

CECILY

Uncle Jack, you are not going to refuse your own brother's hand?

JACK

Nothing will induce me to take his hand. I think his coming down here disgraceful. He knows perfectly well why.

CECILY

Uncle Jack, do be nice. There is some good in

everyone. Ernest has just been telling me about his poor invalid friend Mr. Bunbury whom he goes to visit so often. And surely there must be much good in one who is kind to an invalid, and leaves the pleasures of London to sit by a bed of pain.

JACK

Oh! he has been talking about Bunbury, has he?

CECILY

Yes, he has told me all about poor Mr. Bunbury, and his terrible state of health.

JACK

Bunbury! Well, I won't have him talk to you about Bunbury or about anything else. It is enough to drive one perfectly frantic.

ALGERNON

Of course I admit that the faults were all on my side. But I must say that I think that Brother John's coldness to me is peculiarly painful. I expected a more enthusiastic welcome, especially considering it is the first time I have come here.

CECILY

Uncle Jack, if you don't shake hands with Ernest, I will never forgive you.

JACK

Never forgive me?

CECILY

Never, never, never!

JACK

Well, this is the last time I shall ever do it.

[*Shakes hands with Algernon and glares.*]

CHASUBLE

It's pleasant, is it not, to see so perfect a reconciliation? I think we might leave the two brothers together.

MISS PRISM

Cecily, you will come with us.

CECILY

Certainly, Miss Prism. My little task of reconciliation is over.

CHASUBLE

You have done a beautiful action to-day, dear child.

MISS PRISM

We must not be premature in our judgments.

CECILY

I feel very happy. [*They all go off.*]

JACK

You young scoundrel, Algy, you must get out of this place as soon as possible. I don't allow any Bunburying here.

[*Enter Merriman.*]

MERRIMAN

I have put Mr. Ernest's things in the room next to yours, sir. I suppose that is all right?

JACK

What?

MERRIMAN

Mr. Ernest's luggage, sir. I have unpacked it and put it in the room next to your own.

JACK

His luggage?

MERRIMAN

Yes, sir. Three portmanteaus, a dressing-case, two hat boxes, and a large luncheon-basket.

ALGERNON

I am afraid I can't stay more than a week this time.

JACK

Merriman, order the dog-cart at once. Mr. Ernest has been suddenly called back to town.

MERRIMAN

Yes, sir. [*Goes back into the house.*]

ALGERNON

What a fearful liar you are, Jack. I have not been called back to town at all.

JACK

Yes, you have.

ALGERNON

I haven't heard anyone call me.

JACK

Your duty as a gentleman calls you back.

ALGERNON

My duty as a gentleman has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree.

JACK

I can quite understand that.

ALGERNON

Well, Cecily is a darling.

JACK

You are not to talk of Miss Cardew like that. I don't like it.

ALGERNON

Well, I don't like your clothes. You look perfectly ridiculous in them. Why on earth don't you go up and change? It is perfectly childish to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest. I call it grotesque.

JACK

You are certainly not staying with me for a whole week as a guest or anything else. You have got to leave . . . by the four-five train.

ALGERNON

I certainly won't leave you so long as you are in mourning. It would be most unfriendly. If I were in mourning you would stay with me, I suppose. I should think it very unkind if you didn't.

JACK

Well, will you go if I change my clothes?

ALGERNON

Yes, if you are not too long. I never saw anybody take so long to dress, and with such little result.

JACK

Well, at any rate, that is better than being always over-dressed as you are.

ALGERNON

If I am occasionally a little over-dressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated.

JACK

Your vanity is ridiculous, your conduct an outrage, and your presence in my garden utterly absurd. However, you have got to catch the

four-five, and I hope you will have a pleasant journey back to town. This Bunburying, as you call it, has not been a great success for you.

[*Goes into the house.*]

ALGERNON

I think it has been a great success. I'm in love with Cecily, and that is everything.

[*Enter Cecily at the back of the garden. She picks up the can and begins to water the flowers.*]

But I must see her before I go, and make arrangements for another Bunbury. Ah, there she is.

CECILY

Oh, I merely came back to water the roses. I thought you were with Uncle Jack.

ALGERNON

He's gone to order the dog-cart for me.

CECILY

Oh, is he going to take you for a nice drive?

ALGERNON

He's going to send me away.

CECILY

Then have we got to part?

ALGERNON

I am afraid so. It's very painful parting.

CECILY

It is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a very brief space of time. The absence of old friends one can endure with equanimity. But even a momentary separation from anyone to whom one has just been introduced is almost unbearable.

ALGERNON

Thank you.

[*Enter Merriman.*]

MERRIMAN

The dog-cart is at the door, sir. [*Algernon looks appealingly at Cecily.*]

CECILY

It can wait, Merriman . . . for . . . five minutes.

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss. [*Exit Merriman.*]

ALGERNON

I hope, Cecily, I shall not offend you if I state quite frankly and openly that you seem to me to be in every way the visible personification of absolute perfection.

CECILY

I think your frankness does you great credit, Ernest. If you will allow me I will copy your remarks into my diary. [*Goes over to table and begins writing in diary.*]

ALGERNON

Do you really keep a diary? I'd give anything to look at it. May I?

CECILY

Oh no. [*Puts her hand over it.*] You see, it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy. But pray, Ernest, don't stop. I delight in taking down from dictation. I have reached "absolute perfection." You can go on. I am quite ready for more.

ALGERNON

[*Somewhat taken aback.*] Ahem! Ahem!

CECILY

Oh, don't cough, Ernest. When one is dictating one should speak fluently and not cough. Besides, I don't know how to spell a cough.

[*Writes as Algernon speaks.*]

ALGERNON

[*Speaking very rapidly.*] Cecily, ever since I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.

CECILY

I don't think that you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it?

ALGERNON

Cecily!

[*Enter Merriman.*]

MERRIMAN

The dog-cart is waiting, sir.

ALGERNON

Tell it to come round next week, at the same hour.

MERRIMAN

[*Looks at Cecily, who makes no sign.*] Yes, sir. [*Merriman retires.*]

CECILY

Uncle Jack would be very much annoyed if he knew you were staying on till next week, at the same hour.

ALGERNON

Oh, I don't care about Jack. I don't care for anybody in the whole world but you. I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won't you?

CECILY

You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.

ALGERNON

For the last three months?

CECILY

Yes, it will be exactly three months on Thursday.

ALGERNON

But how did we become engaged?

CECILY

Well, ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had a younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you of course have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. And of course a man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him after all. I daresay it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with you, Ernest.

ALGERNON

Darling! And when was the engagement actually settled?

CECILY

On the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lovers' knot I promised you always to wear.

ALGERNON

Did I give you this? It's very pretty, isn't it?

CECILY

Yes, you've wonderfully good taste, Ernest. It's the excuse I've always given for your leading such a bad life. And this is the box in which I keep all your dear letters. [*Kneels at table, opens box, and produces letters tied up with blue ribbon.*]

ALGERNON

My letters! But my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.

CECILY

You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I always wrote three times a week, and sometimes oftener.

ALGERNON

Oh, do let me read them, Cecily?

CECILY

Oh, I couldn't possibly. They would make you far too conceited. [*Replaces box.*] The three you wrote me after I had broken off the

engagement are so beautiful, and so badly spelled, that even now I can hardly read them without crying a little.

ALGERNON

But was our engagement ever broken off?

CECILY

Of course it was. On the 22nd of last March. You can see the entry if you like. [*Shows diary.*] "To-day I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming."

ALGERNON

But why on earth did you break it off? What had I done? I had done nothing at all. Cecily, I am very much hurt indeed to hear you broke it off. Particularly when the weather was so charming.

CECILY

It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off at least once. But I forgave you before the week was out.

ALGERNON

[*Crossing to her, and kneeling.*] What a perfect angel you are, Cecily.

CECILY

You dear romantic boy. [*He kisses her, she puts her fingers through his hair.*] I hope your hair curls naturally, does it?

ALGERNON

Yes, darling, with a little help from others.

CECILY

I am so glad.

ALGERNON

You'll never break off our engagement again, Cecily?

CECILY

I don't think I could break it off now that I have actually met you. Besides, of course, there is the question of your name.

ALGERNON

Yes, of course. [*Nervously.*]

CECILY

You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had

always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest. [*Algernon rises, Cecily also.*] There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest.

ALGERNON

But, my dear child, do you mean to say you could not love me if I had some other name?

CECILY

But what name?

ALGERNON

Oh, any name you like—Algernon—for instance . . .

CECILY

But I don't like the name of Algernon.

ALGERNON

Well, my own dear, sweet, loving little darling, I really can't see why you should object to the name of Algernon. It is not at all a bad name. In fact, it is rather an aristocratic name. Half of the chaps who get into the Bankruptcy Court are called Algernon. But seriously, Cecily . . .

[*Moving to her*] . . . if my name was Algy, couldn't you love me?

CECILY

[*Rising.*] I might respect you, Ernest, I might admire your character, but I fear that I should not be able to give you my undivided attention.

ALGERNON

Ahem! Cecily! [*Picking up hat.*] Your Rector here is, I suppose, thoroughly experienced in the practice of all the rites and ceremonials of the Church?

CECILY

Oh, yes. Dr. Chasuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows.

ALGERNON

I must see him at once on a most important christening—I mean on most important business.

CECILY

Oh!

ALGERNON

I shan't be away more than half an hour.

CECILY

Considering that we have been engaged since February the 14th, and that I only met you to-day for the first time, I think it is rather hard that you should leave me for so long a period as half an hour. Couldn't you make it twenty minutes?

ALGERNON

I'll be back in no time.

[*Kisses her and rushes down the garden.*]

CECILY

What an impetuous boy he is! I like his hair so much. I must enter his proposal in my diary.

[*Enter Merriman.*]

MERRIMAN

A Miss Fairfax has just called to see Mr. Worthing. On very important business Miss Fairfax states.

CECILY

Isn't Mr. Worthing in his library?

MERRIMAN

Mr. Worthing went over in the direction of the Rectory some time ago.

CECILY

Pray ask the lady to come out here; Mr. Worthing is sure to be back soon. And you can bring tea.

MERRIMAN

Yes, Miss. [*Goes out.*]

CECILY

Miss Fairfax! I suppose one of the many good elderly women who are associated with Uncle Jack in some of his philanthropic work in London. I don't quite like women who are interested in philanthropic work. I think it is so forward of them.

[*Enter Merriman.*]

MERRIMAN

Miss Fairfax.

[*Enter Gwendolen.*] [*Exit Merriman.*]

CECILY

[*Advancing to meet her.*] Pray let me introduce myself to you. My name is Cecily Cardew.

GWENDOLEN

Cecily Cardew? [*Moving to her and shaking hands.*] What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong.

CECILY

How nice of you to like me so much after we have known each other such a comparatively short time. Pray sit down.

GWENDOLEN

[*Still standing up.*] I may call you Cecily, may I not?

CECILY

With pleasure!

GWENDOLEN

And you will always call me Gwendolen, won't you?

CECILY

If you wish.

GWENDOLEN

Then that is all quite settled, is it not?

CECILY

I hope so. [*A pause. They both sit down together.*]

GWENDOLEN

Perhaps this might be a favourable opportunity for my mentioning who I am. My father is Lord Bracknell. You have never heard of papa, I suppose?

CECILY

I don't think so.

GWENDOLEN

Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive. Cecily, mamma, whose views on education are remarkably strict, has brought me up to be extremely short-sighted; it is part of her system; so do you mind my looking at you through my glasses?

CECILY

Oh! not at all, Gwendolen. I am very fond of being looked at.

GWENDOLEN

[*After examining Cecily carefully through a lorgnette.*] You are here on a short visit I suppose.

CECILY

Oh no! I live here.

GWENDOLEN

[*Severely.*] Really? Your mother, no doubt, or some female relative of advanced years, resides here also?

CECILY

Oh no! I have no mother, nor, in fact, any relations.

GWENDOLEN

Indeed?

CECILY

My dear guardian, with the assistance of Miss Prism, has the arduous task of looking after me.

GWENDOLEN

Your guardian?

CECILY

Yes, I am Mr. Worthing's ward.

GWENDOLEN

Oh! It is strange he never mentioned to me that he had a ward. How secretive of him! He grows more interesting hourly. I am not sure, however, that the news inspires me with feelings of unmixed delight. [*Rising and going to her.*] I am very fond of you, Cecily; I have liked you ever since I met you! But I am bound to state that now that I know that you are Mr. Worthing's ward, I cannot help expressing a wish you were—well just a little older than you seem to be—and not quite so very alluring in appearance. In fact, if I may speak candidly——

CECILY

Pray do! I think that whenever one has anything unpleasant to say, one should always be quite candid.

GWENDOLEN

Well, to speak with perfect candour, Cecily,

I wish that you were fully forty-two, and more than usually plain for your age. Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception. But even men of the noblest possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the influence of the physical charms of others. Modern, no less than Ancient History, supplies us with many most painful examples of what I refer to. If it were not so, indeed, History would be quite unreadable.

CECILY

I beg your pardon, Gwendolen, did you say Ernest?

GWENDOLEN

Yes.

CECILY

Oh, but it is not Mr. Ernest Worthing who is my guardian. It is his brother—his elder brother.

GWENDOLEN

[*Sitting down again.*] Ernest never mentioned to me that he had a brother.

CECILY

I am sorry to say they have not been on good terms for a long time.

GWENDOLEN

Ah! that accounts for it. And now that I think of it I have never heard any man mention his brother. The subject seems distasteful to most men. Cecily, you have lifted a load from my mind. I was growing almost anxious. It would have been terrible if any cloud had come across a friendship like ours, would it not? Of course you are quite, quite sure that it is not Mr. Ernest Worthing who is your guardian?

CECILY

Quite sure. [*A pause.*] In fact, I am going to be his.

GWENDOLEN

[*Enquiringly.*] I beg your pardon?

CECILY

[*Rather shy and confidingly.*] Dearest Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make a secret of it to you. Our little county newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. Mr.

Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.

GWENDOLEN

[*Quite politely, rising.*] My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr. Ernest Worthing is engaged to me. The announcement will appear in the "Morning Post" on Saturday at the latest.

CECILY

[*Very politely, rising.*] I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago. [*Shows diary.*]

GWENDOLEN

[*Examines diary through her lorgnette carefully.*] It is certainly very curious, for he asked me to be his wife yesterday afternoon at 5:30. If you would care to verify the incident, pray do so. [*Produces diary of her own.*] I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train. I am so sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid *I* have the prior claim.

CECILY

It would distress me more than I can tell you, dear Gwendolen, if it caused you any mental or physical anguish, but I feel bound to point out that since Ernest proposed to you he clearly has changed his mind.

GWENDOLEN

[*Meditatively.*] If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand.

CECILY

[*Thoughtfully and sadly.*] Whatever unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it after we are married.

GWENDOLEN

Do you allude to me, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous. On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one's mind. It becomes a pleasure.

CECILY

Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

GWENDOLEN

[*Satirically.*] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.

[*Enter Merriman, followed by the footman. He carries a salver, table cloth, and plate stand. Cecily is about to retort. The presence of the servants exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls chafe.*]

MERRIMAN

Shall I lay tea here as usual, Miss?

CECILY

[*Sternly, in a calm voice.*] Yes, as usual. [*Merriman begins to clear table and lay cloth. A long pause. Cecily and Gwendolen glare at each other.*]

GWENDOLEN

Are there many interesting walks in the vicinity, Miss Cardew?

CECILY

Oh! yes! a great many. From the top of one of the hills quite close one can see five counties.

GWENDOLEN

Five counties! I don't think I should like that. I hate crowds.

CECILY

[*Sweetly.*] I suppose that is why you live in town? [*Gwendolen bites her lip, and beats her foot nervously with her parasol.*]

GWENDOLEN

[*Looking round.*] Quite a well-kept garden this is, Miss Cardew.

CECILY

So glad you like it, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN

I had no idea there were any flowers in the country.

CECILY

Oh, flowers are as common here, Miss Fairfax, as people are in London.

GWENDOLEN

Personally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country, if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death.

CECILY

Ah! This is what the newspapers call agricultural depression, is it not? I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it just at present. It is almost an epidemic amongst them, I have been told. May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax?

GWENDOLEN

[*With elaborate politeness.*] Thank you. [*Aside.*] Detestable girl! But I require tea!

CECILY

[*Sweetly.*] Sugar?

GWENDOLEN

[*Superciliously.*] No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. [*Cecily looks angrily*

at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.]

CECILY

[*Severely.*] Cake or bread and butter?

GWENDOLEN

[*In a bored manner.*] Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

CECILY

[*Cuts a very large slice of cake, and puts it on the tray.*] Hand that to Miss Fairfax.

[*Merriman does so, and goes out with footman. Gwendolen drinks the tea and makes a grimace. Puts down cup at once, reaches out her hand to the bread and butter, looks at it, and finds it is cake. Rises in indignation.*]

GWENDOLEN

You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far.

CECILY

[*Rising.*] To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.

GWENDOLEN

From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.

CECILY

It seems to me, Miss Fairfax, that I am trespassing on your valuable time. No doubt you have many other calls of a similar character to make in the neighbourhood.

[*Enter Jack.*]

GWENDOLEN

[*Catching sight of him.*] Ernest! My own Ernest!

JACK

Gwendolen! Darling! [*Offers to kiss her.*]

GWENDOLEN

[*Drawing back.*] A moment! May I ask if

you are engaged to be married to this young lady? [*Points to Cecily.*]

JACK

[*Laughing.*] To dear little Cecily! Of course not! What could have put such an idea into your pretty little head?

GWENDOLEN

Thank you. You may! [*Offers her cheek.*]

CECILY

[*Very sweetly.*] I knew there must be some misunderstanding, Miss Fairfax. The gentleman whose arm is at present round your waist is my dear guardian, Mr. John Worthing.

GWENDOLEN

I beg your pardon?

CECILY

This is Uncle Jack.

GWENDOLEN

[*Receding.*] Jack! Oh!

[*Enter Algernon.*]

CECILY

Here is Ernest.

ALGERNON

[*Goes straight over to Cecily without noticing anyone else.*] My own love! [*Offers to kiss her.*]

CECILY

[*Drawing back.*] A moment, Ernest! May I ask you—are you engaged to be married to this young lady?

ALGERNON

[*Looking round.*] To what young lady? Good heavens! Gwendolen!

CECILY

Yes! to good heavens, Gwendolen, I mean to Gwendolen.

ALGERNON

[*Laughing.*] Of course not! What could have put such an idea into your pretty little head?

CECILY

Thank you. [*Presenting her cheek to be kissed.*] You may. [*Algernon kisses her.*]

GWENDOLEN

I felt there was some slight error, Miss Cardew. The gentleman who is now embracing you is my cousin, Mr. Algernon Moncrieff.

CECILY

[*Breaking away from Algernon.*] Algernon Moncrieff! Oh! [*The two girls move towards each other and put their arms round each other's waists as if for protection.*]

CECILY

Are you called Algernon?

ALGERNON

I cannot deny it.

CECILY

Oh!

GWENDOLEN

Is your name really John?

JACK

[*Standing rather proudly.*] I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked. But my name certainly is John. It has been John for years.

CECILY

[*To Gwendolen.*] A gross deception has been practised on both of us.

GWENDOLEN

My poor wounded Cecily!

CECILY

My sweet wronged Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN

[*Slowly and seriously.*] You will call me sister, will you not? [*They embrace. Jack and Algernon groan and walk up and down.*]

CECILY

[*Rather brightly.*] There is just one question I would like to be allowed to ask my guardian.

GWENDOLEN

An admirable idea! Mr. Worthing, there is just one question I would like to be permitted to put to you. Where is your brother Ernest? We are both engaged to be married to your brother Ernest, so it is a matter of some importance to us to know where your brother Ernest is at present.

JACK

[*Slowly and hesitatingly.*] Gwendolen—Cecily —it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. However I will tell you quite frankly that I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all. I never had a brother in my life, and I certainly have not the smallest intention of ever having one in the future.

CECILY

[*Surprised.*] No brother at all?

JACK

[*Cheerily.*] None!

GWENDOLEN

[*Severely.*] Had you never a brother of any kind?

JACK

[*Pleasantly.*] Never. Not even of any kind.

GWENDOLEN

I am afraid it is quite clear, Cecily, that

neither of us is engaged to be married to anyone.

CECILY

It is not a very pleasant position for a young girl suddenly to find herself in. Is it?

GWENDOLEN

Let us go into the house. They will hardly venture to come after us there.

CECILY

No, men are so cowardly, aren't they?

[*They retire into the house with scornful looks.*]

JACK

This ghastly state of things is what you call Bunburying, I suppose?

ALGERNON

Yes, and a perfectly wonderful Bunbury it is. The most wonderful Bunbury I have ever had in my life.

JACK

Well, you've no right whatsoever to Bunbury here.

ALGERNON

That is absurd. One has a right to Bunbury anywhere one chooses. Every serious Bunburyist knows that.

JACK

Serious Bunburyist! Good heavens!

ALGERNON

Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven't got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature.

JACK

Well, the only small satisfaction I have in the whole of this wretched business is that your friend Bunbury is quite exploded. You won't be able to run down to the country quite so often as you used to do, dear Algy. And a very good thing too.

ALGERNON

Your brother is a little off colour, isn't he, dear Jack? You won't be able to disappear to

London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was. And not a bad thing either.

JACK

As for your conduct towards Miss Cardew, I must say that your taking in a sweet, simple, innocent girl like that is quite inexcusable. To say nothing of the fact that she is my ward.

ALGERNON

I can see no possible defence at all for your deceiving a brilliant, clever, thoroughly experienced young lady like Miss Fairfax. To say nothing of the fact that she is my cousin.

JACK

I wanted to be engaged to Gwendolen, that is all. I love her.

ALGERNON

Well, I simply wanted to be engaged to Cecily. I adore her.

JACK

There is certainly no chance of your marrying Miss Cardew.

ALGERNON

I don't think there is much likelihood, Jack, of you and Miss Fairfax being united.

JACK

Well, that is no business of yours.

ALGERNON

If it was my business, I wouldn't talk about it. [*Begins to eat muffins.*] It is very vulgar to talk about one's business. Only people like stockbrokers do that, and then merely at dinner-parties.

JACK

How you can sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can't make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless.

ALGERNON

Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.

JACK

I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances.

ALGERNON

When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as anyone who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins. [*Rising.*]

JACK

[*Rising.*] Well, that is no reason why you should eat them all in that greedy way. [*Takes muffins from Algernon.*]

ALGERNON

[*Offering tea-cake.*] I wish you would have tea-cake instead. I don't like tea-cake.

JACK

Good heavens! I suppose a man may eat his own muffins in his own garden.

ALGERNON

But you have just said it was perfectly heartless to eat muffins.

JACK

I said it was perfectly heartless of you, under the circumstances. That is a very different thing.

ALGERNON

That may be. But the muffins are the same. [*He seizes the muffin-dish from Jack.*]

JACK

Algy, I wish to goodness you would go.

ALGERNON

You can't possibly ask me to go without having some dinner. It's absurd. I never go without my dinner. No one ever does, except vegetarians and people like that. Besides I have just made arrangements with Dr. Chasuble to be christened at a quarter to six under the name of Ernest.

JACK

My dear fellow, the sooner you give up that nonsense the better. I made arrangements this

morning with Dr. Chasuble to be christened myself at 5:30, and I naturally will take the name of Ernest. Gwendolen would wish it. We can't both be christened Ernest. It's absurd. Besides, I have a perfect right to be christened if I like. There is no evidence at all that I ever have been christened by anybody. I should think it extremely probable I never was, and so does Dr. Chasuble. It is entirely different in your case. You have been christened already.

ALGERNON

Yes, but I have not been christened for years.

JACK

Yes, but you have been christened. That is the important thing.

ALGERNON

Quite so. So I know my constitution can stand it. If you are not quite sure about your ever having been christened, I must say I think it rather dangerous your venturing on it now. It might make you very unwell. You can hardly have forgotten that someone very closely connected with you was very nearly carried off this week in Paris by a severe chill.

JACK

Yes, but you said yourself that a severe chill was not hereditary.

ALGERNON

It usen't to be, I know—but I daresay it is now. Science is always making wonderful improvements in things.

JACK

[*Picking up the muffin-dish.*] Oh, that is nonsense; you are always talking nonsense.

ALGERNON

Jack, you are at the muffins again! I wish you wouldn't. There are only two left. [*Takes them.*] I told you I was particularly fond of muffins.

JACK

But I hate tea-cake.

ALGERNON

Why on earth then do you allow tea-cake to be served up for your guests? What ideas you have of hospitality!

JACK

Algernon! I have already told you to go. I don't want you here. Why don't you go!

ALGERNON

I haven't quite finished my tea yet! and there is still one muffin left. [*Jack groans, and sinks into a chair. Algernon still continues eating.*]

ACT-DROP.

THIRD ACT.

SCENE—*Morning-room at the Manor House.*

[*Gwendolen and Cecily are at the window, looking out into the garden.*]

GWENDOLEN

The fact that they did not follow us at once into the house, as anyone else would have done, seems to me to show that they have some sense of shame left.

CECILY

They have been eating muffins. That looks like repentance.

GWENDOLEN

[*After a pause.*] They don't seem to notice us at all. Couldn't you cough?

CECILY

But I haven't got a cough.

GWENDOLEN

They're looking at us. What effrontery!

CECILY

They're approaching. That's very forward of them.

GWENDOLEN

Let us preserve a dignified silence.

CECILY

Certainly. It's the only thing to do now.

[*Enter Jack followed by Algernon. They whistle some dreadful popular air from a British Opera.*]

GWENDOLEN

This dignified silence seems to produce an unpleasant effect.

CECILY

A most distasteful one.

GWENDOLEN

But we will not be the first to speak.

CECILY

Certainly not.

GWENDOLEN

Mr. Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your reply.

CECILY

Gwendolen, your common sense is invaluable. Mr. Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian's brother?

ALGERNON

In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you.

CECILY

[*To Gwendolen.*] That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?

GWENDOLEN

Yes, dear, if you can believe him.

CECILY

I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.

GWENDOLEN

True. In matters of grave importance, style,

not sincerity is the vital thing. Mr. Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?

JACK

Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?

GWENDOLEN

I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism. [*Moving to Cecily.*] Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing's. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it.

CECILY

I am more than content with what Mr. Moncrieff said. His voice alone inspires one with absolute credulity.

GWENDOLEN

Then you think we should forgive them?

CECILY

Yes. I mean no.

GWENDOLEN

True! I had forgotten. There are principles at stake that one cannot surrender. Which of us should tell them? The task is not a pleasant one.

CECILY

Could we not both speak at the same time?

GWENDOLEN

An excellent idea! I nearly always speak at the same time as other people. Will you take the time from me?

CECILY

Certainly. [*Gwendolen beats time with uplifted finger.*]

GWENDOLEN AND CECILY

[*Speaking together.*] Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!

JACK AND ALGERNON

[*Speaking together.*] Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon.

GWENDOLEN

[*To Jack.*] For my sake you are prepared to do this terrible thing?

JACK

I am.

CECILY

[*To Algernon.*] To please me you are ready to face this fearful ordeal?

ALGERNON

I am!

GWENDOLEN

How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us.

JACK

We are. [*Clasps hands with Algernon.*]

CECILY

They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing.

GWENDOLEN

[*To Jack.*[Darling!

ALGERNON

[*To Cecily.*] Darling. [*They fall into each other's arms.*]

[*Enter Merriman. When he enters he coughs loudly, seeing the situation.*]

MERRIMAN

Ahem! Ahem! Lady Bracknell!

JACK

Good heavens!

[*Enter Lady Bracknell. The couples separate in alarm. Exit Merriman.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

Gwendolen! What does this mean?

GWENDOLEN

Merely that I am engaged to be married to Mr. Worthing, mamma.

LADY BRACKNELL

Come here. Sit down. Sit down immediately. Hesitation of any kind is a sign of mental decay in the young, of physical weakness in the old. [*Turns to Jack.*] Apprised, sir, of my daughter's sudden flight by her trusty maid, whose

confidence I purchased by means of a small coin, I followed her at once by a luggage train. Her unhappy father is, I am glad to say, under the impression that she is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture by the University Extension Scheme on the Influence of a permanent income on Thought. I do not propose to undeceive him. Indeed I have never undeceived him on any question. I would consider it wrong. But of course, you will clearly understand that all communication between yourself and my daughter must cease immediately from this moment. On this point, as indeed on all points, I am firm.

JACK

I am engaged to be married to Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell!

LADY BRACKNELL

You are nothing of the kind, sir. And now, as regards Algernon! . . . Algernon!

ALGERNON

Yes, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

May I ask if it is in this house that your invalid friend Mr. Bunbury resides?

ALGERNON

[*Stammering.*] Oh! No! Bunbury doesn't live here. Bunbury is somewhere else at present. In fact, Bunbury is dead.

LADY BRACKNELL

Dead! When did Mr. Bunbury die? His death must have been extremely sudden.

ALGERNON

[*Airily.*] Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon.

LADY BRACKNELL

What did he die of?

ALGERNON

Bunbury? Oh, he was quite exploded.

LADY BRACKNELL

Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage. I was not aware that Mr.

Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity.

ALGERNON

My dear Aunt Augusta, I mean he was found out! The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean—so Bunbury died.

LADY BRACKNELL

He seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians. I am glad, however, that he made up his mind at the last to some definite course of action, and acted under proper medical advice. And now that we have finally got rid of this Mr. Bunbury, may I ask, Mr. Worthing, who is that young person whose hand my nephew Algernon is now holding in what seems to me a peculiarly unnecessary manner?

JACK

That lady is Miss Cecily Cardew, my ward. [*Lady Bracknell bows coldly to Cecily.*]

ALGERNON

I am engaged to be married to Cecily, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

I beg your pardon?

CECILY

Mr. Moncrieff and I are engaged to be married, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*With a shiver, crossing to the sofa and sitting down.*] I do not know whether there is anything peculiarly exciting in the air of this particular part of Hertfordshire, but the number of engagements that go on seems to me considerably above the proper average that statistics have laid down for our guidance. I think some preliminary enquiry on my part would not be out of place. Mr. Worthing, is Miss Cardew at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? I merely desire information. Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus. [*Jack looks perfectly furious, but restrains himself.*]

JACK

[*In a clear, cold voice.*] Miss Cardew is the granddaughter of the late Mr. Thomas Cardew

of 149, Belgrave Square, S.W.; Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporran, Fifeshire, N.B.

LADY BRACKNELL

That sounds not unsatisfactory. Three addresses always inspire confidence, even in tradesmen. But what proof have I of their authenticity?

JACK

I have carefully preserved the Court Guides of the period. They are open to your inspection, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Grimly.*] I have known strange errors in that publication.

JACK

Miss Cardew's family solicitors are Messrs. Markby, Markby, and Markby.

LADY BRACKNELL

Markby, Markby, and Markby? A firm of the very highest position in their profession. Indeed I am told that one of the Mr. Markbys is occa-

sionally to be seen at dinner parties. So far I am satisfied.

JACK

[*Very irritably.*] How extremely kind of you, Lady Bracknell! I have also in my possession, you will be pleased to hear, certificates of Miss Cardew's birth, baptism, whooping cough, registration, vaccination, confirmation, and the measles; both the German and the English variety.

LADY BRACKNELL

Ah! A life crowded with incident, I see; though perhaps somewhat too exciting for a young girl. I am not myself in favour of premature experiences. [*Rises, looks at her watch.*] Gwendolen! the time approaches for our departure. We have not a moment to lose. As a matter of form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?

JACK

Oh! about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds. That is all. Good-bye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Sitting down again.*] A moment, Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces. [*To Cecily.*] Come over here, dear. [*Cecily goes across.*] Pretty child! your dress is sadly simple, and your hair seems almost as Nature might have left it. But we can soon alter all that. A thoroughly experienced French maid produces a really marvellous result in a very brief space of time. I remember recommending one to young Lady Lancing, and after three months her own husband did not know her.

JACK

[*Aside.*] And after six months nobody knew her.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Glares at Jack for a few moments. Then bends, with a practised smile, to Cecily.*] Kindly turn round, sweet child. [*Cecily turns com-*

pletely round.] No, the side view is what I want. [*Cecily presents her profile.*] Yes, quite as I expected. There are distinct social possibilities in your profile. The two weak points in our age are its want of principle and its want of profile. The chin a little higher, dear. Style largely depends on the way the chin is worn. They are worn very high, just at present. Algernon!

ALGERNON

Yes, Aunt Augusta!

LADY BRACKNELL

There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew's profile.

ALGERNON

Cecily is the sweetest, dearest, prettiest girl in the whole world. And I don't care twopence about social possibilities.

LADY BRACKNELL

Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that. [*To Cecily.*] Dear child, of course you know that Algernon has nothing but his debts to depend

upon. But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way. Well, I suppose I must give my consent.

ALGERNON

Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

Cecily, you may kiss me!

CECILY

[*Kisses her.*] Thank you, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

You may also address me as Aunt Augusta for the future.

CECILY

Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

The marriage, I think, had better take place quite soon.

ALGERNON

Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

CECILY

Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL

To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable.

JACK

I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, but this engagement is quite out of the question. I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. That consent I absolutely decline to give.

LADY BRACKNELL

Upon what grounds may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?

JACK

It pains me very much to have to speak frankly to you, Lady Bracknell, about your nephew, but the fact is that I do not approve at

all of his moral character. I suspect him of being untruthful. [*Algernon and Cecily look at him in indignant amazement.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian.

JACK

I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter. This afternoon, during my temporary absence in London on an important question of romance, he obtained admission to my house by means of the false pretense of being my brother. Under an assumed name he drank, I've just been informed by my butler, an entire pint bottle of my Perrier-Jouet, Brut, '89; a wine I was specially reserving for myself. Continuing his disgraceful deception, he succeeded in the course of the afternoon in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently stayed to tea, and devoured every single muffin. And what makes his conduct all the more heartless is, that he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not

even of any kind. I distinctly told him so myself yesterday afternoon.

LADY BRACKNELL

Ahem! Mr. Worthing, after careful consideration I have decided entirely to overlook my nephew's conduct to you.

JACK

That is very generous of you, Lady Bracknell. My own decision, however, is unalterable. I decline to give my consent.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*To Cecily.*] Come here, sweet child. [*Cecily goes over.*] How old are you, dear?

CECILY

Well, I am really only eighteen, but I always admit to twenty when I go to evening parties.

LADY BRACKNELL

You are perfectly right in making some slight alteration. Indeed, no woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so calculating. . . . [*In a meditative manner.*] Eighteen, but admitting to twenty at evening parties.

Well, it will not be very long before you are of age and free from the restraints of tutelage. So I don't think your guardian's consent is, after all, a matter of any importance.

JACK

Pray excuse me, Lady Bracknell, for interrupting you again, but it is only fair to tell you that according to the terms of her grandfather's will Miss Cardew does not come legally of age till she is thirty-five.

LADY BRACKNELL

That does not seem to me to be a grave objection. Thirty-five is a very attractive age. London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years. Lady Dumbleton is an instance in point. To my own knowledge she has been thirty-five ever since she arrived at the age of forty, which was many years ago now. I see no reason why our dear Cecily should not be even still more attractive at the age you mention than she is at present. There will be a large accumulation of property.

CECILY

Algy, could you wait for me till I was thirty-five?

ALGERNON

Of course I could, Cecily. You know I could.

CECILY

Yes, I felt it instinctively, but I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross. I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like punctuality in others, and waiting, even to be married, is quite out of the question.

ALGERNON

Then what is to be done, Cecily?

CECILY

I don't know, Mr. Moncrieff.

LADY BRACKNELL

My dear Mr. Worthing, as Miss Cardew states positively that she cannot wait till she is thirty-five—a remark which I am bound to say seems to me to show a somewhat impatient nature—I would beg of you to reconsider your decision.

JACK

But my dear Lady Bracknell, the matter is entirely in your own hands. The moment you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will most gladly allow your nephew to form an alliance with my ward.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Rising and drawing herself up.*] You must be quite aware that what you propose is out of the question.

JACK

Then a passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward to.

LADY BRACKNELL

That is not the destiny I propose for Gwendolen. Algernon, of course, can choose for himself. [*Pulls out her watch.*] Come, dear; [*Gwendolen rises*] we have already missed five, if not six, trains. To miss any more might expose us to comment on the platform.

[*Enter Dr. Chasuble.*]

CHASUBLE

Everything is quite ready for the christenings.

LADY BRACKNELL

The christenings, sir! Is not that somewhat premature?

CHASUBLE

[*Looking rather puzzled, and pointing to Jack and Algernon.*] Both these gentlemen have expressed a desire for immediate baptism.

LADY BRACKNELL

At their age? The idea is grotesque and irreligious! Algernon, I forbid you to be baptised. I will not hear of such excesses. Lord Bracknell would be highly displeased if he learned that that was the way in which you wasted your time and money.

CHASUBLE

Am I to understand then that there are to be no christenings at all this afternoon?

JACK

I don't think that, as things are now, it would be of much practical value to either of us, Dr. Chasuble.

CHASUBLE

I am grieved to hear such sentiments from

you, Mr. Worthing. They savour of the heretical views of the Anabaptists, views that I have completely refuted in four of my unpublished sermons. However, as your present mood seems to be one peculiarly secular, I will return to the church at once. Indeed, I have just been informed by the pew-opener that for the last hour and a half Miss Prism has been waiting for me in the vestry.

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Starting.*] Miss Prism! Did I hear you mention a Miss Prism?

CHASUBLE

Yes, Lady Bracknell. I am on my way to join her.

LADY BRACKNELL

Pray allow me to detain you for a moment. This matter may prove to be one of vital importance to Lord Bracknell and myself. Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?

CHASUBLE

[*Somewhat indignantly.*] She is the most

cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.

LADY BRACKNELL

It is obviously the same person. May I ask what position she holds in your household?

CHASUBLE

[*Severely.*] I am a celibate, madam.

JACK

[*Interposing.*] Miss Prism, Lady Bracknell, has been for the last three years Miss Cardew's esteemed governess and valued companion.

LADY BRACKNELL

In spite of what I hear of her, I must see her at once. Let her be sent for.

CHASUBLE

[*Looking off.*] She approaches; she is nigh.

[*Enter Miss Prism hurriedly.*]

MISS PRISM

I was told you expected me in the vestry, dear Canon. I have been waiting for you there for an hour and three quarters. [*Catches sight of Lady Bracknell who has fixed her with a stony glare. Miss Prism grows pale and quails. She looks anxiously round as if desirous to escape.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

[*In a severe, judicial voice.*] Prism! [*Miss Prism bows her head in shame.*] Come here, Prism! [*Miss Prism approaches in a humble manner.*] Prism! Where is that baby? [*General consternation. The Canon starts back in horror. Algernon and Jack pretend to be anxious to shield Cecily and Gwendolen from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal.*] Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby, of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight, standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater. It contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. [*Miss Prism starts in involuntary indignation.*] But the baby was not there! [*Everyone looks at Miss Prism.*] Prism! Where is that baby? [*A pause.*]

MISS PRISM

Lady Bracknell, I admit with shame that I do

not know. I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag, in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette, and placed the baby in the hand-bag.

JACK

[*Who has been listening attentively.*] But where did you deposit the hand-bag?

MISS PRISM

Do not ask me, Mr. Worthing.

JACK

Miss Prism, this is a matter of no small importance to me. I insist on knowing where you deposited the hand-bag that contained that infant.

MISS PRISM

I left it in the cloak room of one of the larger railway stations in London.

JACK

What railway station?

MISS PRISM

[*Quite crushed.*] Victoria. The Brighton line. [*Sinks into a chair.*]

JACK

I must retire to my room for a moment. Gwendolen, wait here for me.

GWENDOLEN

If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life.

[*Exit Jack in great excitement.*]

CHASUBLE

What do you think this means, Lady Bracknell?

LADY BRACKNELL

I dare not even suspect, Dr. Chasuble. I need hardly tell you that in families of high position

strange coincidences are not supposed to occur. They are hardly considered the thing.

[*Noises heard overhead as if someone was throwing trunks about. Everyone looks up.*]

CECILY

Uncle Jack seems strangely agitated.

CHASUBLE

Your guardian has a very emotional nature.

LADY BRACKNELL

This noise is extremely unpleasant. It sounds as if he was having an argument. I dislike arguments of any kind. They are always vulgar, and often convincing.

CHASUBLE

[*Looking up.*] It has stopped now. [*The noise is redoubled.*]

LADY BRACKNELL

I wish he would arrive at some conclusion.

GWENDOLEN

This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.

[*Enter Jack with a hand-bag of black leather in his hand.*]

JACK

[*Rushing over to Miss Prism.*] Is this the hand-bag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

MISS PRISM

[*Calmly.*] It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

JACK

[*In a pathetic voice.*] Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.

MISS PRISM

[*Amazed.*] You?

JACK

[*Embracing her.*] Yes . . . mother!

MISS PRISM

[*Recoiling in indignant astonishment.*] Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried!

JACK

Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you. [*Tries to embrace her again.*]

MISS PRISM

[*Still more indignant.*] Mr. Worthing, there is some error. [*Pointing to Lady Bracknell.*] There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.

JACK

[*After a pause.*] Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?

LADY BRACKNELL

I am afraid that the news I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother.

JACK

Algy's elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily,—how could you have ever doubted that I had a brother? [*Seizes hold of Algernon.*] Dr. Chasuble, my unfortunate brother. Miss Prism, my unfortunate brother. Gwendolen, my unfortunate brother. Algy, you young scoundrel, you will have to treat me with more respect in the future. You have never behaved to me like a brother in all your life.

ALGERNON

Well, not till to-day, old boy, I admit. I did my best, however, though I was out of practice. [*Shakes hands.*]

GWENDOLEN

[*To Jack.*] My own! But what own are you?

What is your Christian name, now that you have become someone else?

JACK

Good heavens! . . . I had quite forgotten that point. Your decision on the subject of my name is irrevocable, I suppose?

GWENDOLEN

I never change, except in my affections.

CECILY

What a noble nature you have, Gwendolen!

JACK

Then the question had better be cleared up at once. Aunt Augusta, a moment. At the time when Miss Prism left me in the hand-bag, had I been christened already?

LADY BRACKNELL

Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished on you by your fond and doting parents.

JACK

Then I was christened! That is settled. Now, what name was I given? Let me know the worst.

LADY BRACKNELL

Being the eldest son you were naturally christened after your father.

JACK

[*Irritably.*] Yes, but what was my father's Christian name?

LADY BRACKNELL

[*Meditatively.*] I cannot at the present moment recall what the General's Christian name was. But I have no doubt he had one. He was eccentric, I admit. But only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestion, and other things of that kind.

JACK

Algy! Can't you recollect what our father's Christian name was?

ALGERNON

My dear boy, we were never even on speaking terms. He died before I was a year old.

JACK

His name would appear in the Army Lists of the period, I suppose, Aunt Augusta?

LADY BRACKNELL

The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life. But I have no doubt his name would appear in any military directory.

JACK

The Army Lists of the last forty years are here. These delightful records should have been my constant study. [*Rushes to bookcase and tears the books out.*] M. Generals . . . Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, what ghastly names they have —Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General 1869, Christian names, Ernest John. [*Puts book very quietly down and speaks quite calmly.*] I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.

LADY BRACKNELL

Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest. I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name.

GWENDOLEN

Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!

JACK

Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

GWENDOLEN

I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.

JACK

My own one!

CHASUBLE

[*To Miss Prism.*] Lætitia! [*Embraces her.*]

MISS PRISM

[*Enthusiastically.*] Frederick! At last!

ALGERNON

Cecily! [*Embraces her.*] At last!

JACK

Gwendolen! [*Embraces her.*] At last!

LADY BRACKNELL

My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.

JACK

On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

CURTAIN.

An Ideal Husband

A Play

To
Frank Harris
A Slight Tribute to
His Power and Distinction
As an Artist
His Chivalry and Nobility
As a Friend

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY.

THE EARL OF CAVERSHAM, K.G.

VISCOUNT GORING, his Son

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN, Bart., Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC, Attaché at the French Embassy in London

MR. MONTFORD

MASON, Butler to Sir Robert Chiltern

PHIPPS, Lord Goring's Servant

HAROLD } footmen
JAMES }

LADY CHILTERN

LADY MARKBY

THE COUNTESS OF BASILDON

MRS. MARCHMONT

MISS MABEL CHILTERN, Sir Robert Chiltern's Sister

MRS. CHEVELEY

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY.

ACT I *The Octagon Room in Sir Robert Chiltern's House in Grosvenor Square.*

ACT II *Morning-room in Sir Robert Chiltern's House.*

ACT III *The Library of Lord Goring's House in Curzon Street.*

ACT IV *Same as Act II.*

Time

The Present.

Place

London.

The Action of the Play is completed within twenty-four hours.

FIRST ACT

SCENE—*The octagon room at Sir Robert Chiltern's house in Grosvenor Square.*

[*The room is brilliantly lighted and full of guests. At the top of the staircase stands Lady Chiltern, a woman of grave Greek beauty, about twenty-seven years of age. She receives the guests as they come up. Over the well of the staircase hangs a great chandelier with wax lights, which illumine a large eighteenth-century French tapestry—representing the Triumph of Love, from a design by Boucher—that is stretched on the staircase wall. On the right is the entrance to the music-room. The sound of a string quartette is faintly heard. The entrance on the left leads to other reception-rooms. Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, two very pretty women, are seated together on a Louis Seize sofa. They are types of exquisite*

fragility. Their affectation of manner has a delicate charm. Watteau would have loved to paint them.]

MRS. MARCHMONT

Going on to the Hartlocks' to-night, Margaret?

LADY BASILDON

I suppose so. Are you?

MRS. MARCHMONT

Yes. Horribly tedious parties they give, don't they?

LADY BASILDON

Horribly tedious! Never know why I go. Never know why I go anywhere.

MRS. MARCHMONT

I come here to be educated.

LADY BASILDON

Ah! I hate being educated.

MRS. MARCHMONT

So do I. It puts one almost on a level with the commercial classes, doesn't it? But dear Gertrude Chiltern is always telling me that I

should have some serious purpose in life. So I come here to try to find one.

LADY BASILDON

[*Looking round through her lorgnette.*] I don't see anybody here to-night whom one could possibly call a serious purpose. The man who took me in to dinner talked to me about his wife the whole time.

MRS. MARCHMONT

How very trivial of him!

LADY BASILDON

Terribly trivial! What did your man talk about?

MRS. MARCHMONT

About myself.

LADY BASILDON

[*Languidly.*] And were you interested?

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Shaking her head.*] Not in the smallest degree.

LADY BASILDON

What martyrs we are, dear Margaret!

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Rising.*] And how well it becomes us, Olivia!

[*They rise and go towards the music-room. The Vicomte de Nanjac, a young attaché known for his neckties and his Anglomania, approaches with a low bow, and enters into conversation.*]

MASON

[*Announcing guests from the top of the staircase.*] Mr. and Lady Jane Barford. Lord Caversham.

[*Enter Lord Caversham, an old gentleman of seventy, wearing the riband and star of the Garter. A fine Whig type. Rather like a portrait by Lawrence.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Good evening, Lady Chiltern! Has my good-for-nothing young son been here?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Smiling.*] I don't think Lord Goring has arrived yet.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Coming up to Lord Caversham.*] Why do you call Lord Goring good-for-nothing?

[*Mabel Chiltern is a perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type. She has all the fragrance and freedom of a flower. There is ripple after ripple of sunlight in her hair, and the little mouth, with its parted lips, is expectant, like the mouth of a child. She has the fascinating tyranny of youth, and the astonishing courage of innocence. To sane people she is not reminiscent of any work of art. But she is really like a Tanagra statuette, and would be rather annoyed if she were told so.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Because he leads such an idle life.

MABEL CHILTERN

How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you?

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Looking at her with a kindly twinkle in his eyes.*] You are a very charming young lady!

MABEL CHILTERN

How sweet of you to say that, Lord Caversham. Do come to us more often. You know we are always at home on Wednesdays, and you look so well with your star!

LORD CAVERSHAM

Never go anywhere now. Sick of London Society. Shouldn't mind being introduced to my own tailor; he always votes on the right side. But object strongly to being sent down to dinner with my wife's milliner. Never could stand Lady Caversham's bonnets!

LADY CHILTERN

Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Hum! Which is Goring? Beautiful idiot, or the other thing?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Gravely.*] I have been obliged for the present to put Lord Goring into a class quite by himself. But he is developing charmingly.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Into what?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a little curtsey.*] I hope to let you know very soon, Lord Caversham!

MASON

[*Announcing guests.*] Lady Markby. Mrs. Cheveley.

[*Enter Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley. Lady Markby is a pleasant, kindly, popular woman, with gray hair à la marquise and good lace. Mrs. Cheveley, who accompanies her, is tall and rather slight. Lips very thin and highly coloured, a line of scarlet on a pallid face. Venetian red hair, aquiline nose, and long throat. Rouge accentuates the natural paleness of her complexion. Gray-green eyes that move restlessly. She is in heliotrope, with diamonds. She looks rather like an orchid, and makes great demands on one's curiosity. A work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools.*]

LADY MARKBY

Good evening, dear Gertrude! So kind of you to let me bring my friend, Mrs. Cheveley.

Two such charming women should know each other!

LADY CHILTERN

[*Advances towards Mrs. Cheveley with a sweet smile. Then suddenly stops, and bows rather distantly.*] I think Mrs. Cheveley and I have met before. I did not know she had married a second time.

LADY MARKBY

[*Genially.*] Ah, nowadays people marry as often as they can, don't they? It is most fashionable. [*To Duchess of Maryborough.*] Dear Duchess, and how is the Duke? Brain still weak, I suppose? Well, that is only to be expected, is it not? His good father was just the same. There is nothing like race, is there?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Playing with her fan.*] But have we really met before, Lady Chiltern? I can't remember where. I have been out of England for so long.

LADY CHILTERN

We were at school together, Mrs. Cheveley.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Superciliously.*] Indeed? I have forgotten all about my schooldays. I have a vague impression that they were detestable.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Coldly.*] I am not surprised!

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*In her sweetest manner.*] Do you know, I am quite looking forward to meeting your clever husband, Lady Chiltern. Since he has been at the Foreign Office, he has been so much talked of in Vienna. They actually succeed in spelling his name right in the newspapers. That in itself is fame, on the continent.

LADY CHILTERN

I hardly think there will be much in common between you and my husband, Mrs. Cheveley. [*Moves away.*]

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

Ah! chère Madame, quelle surprise! I have not seen you since Berlin!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Not since Berlin, Vicomte. Five years ago!

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

And you are younger and more beautiful than ever. How do you manage it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

By making it a rule only to talk to perfectly charming people like yourself.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

Ah! you flatter me. You butter me, as they say here.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Do they say that here? How dreadful of them!

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

Yes, they have a wonderful language. It should be more widely known.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern enters. A man of forty, but looking somewhat younger. Clean-shaven, with finely-cut features, dark-haired and dark-eyed. A personality of mark. Not popular—few personalities are. But intensely admired by the few, and deeply respected by the many. The note of his manner that of perfect distinction, with a slight touch of pride. One feels that he is conscious of the success he has made*

in life. A nervous temperament, with a tired look. The firmly-chiselled mouth and chin contrast strikingly with the romantic expression in the deep-set eyes. The variance is suggestive of an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power. There is nervousness in the nostrils, and in the pale, thin, pointed hands. It would be inaccurate to call him picturesque. Picturesqueness cannot survive the House of Commons. But Vandyck would have liked to have painted his head.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Good evening, Lady Markby! I hope you have brought Sir John with you?

LADY MARKBY

Oh! I have brought a much more charming person than Sir John. Sir John's temper since he has taken seriously to politics has become quite unbearable. Really, now that the House of Commons is trying to become useful, it does a great deal of harm.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I hope not, Lady Markby. At any rate we

do our best to waste the public time, don't we? But who is this charming person you have been kind enough to bring to us?

LADY MARKBY

Her name is Mrs. Cheveley! One of the Dorsetshire Cheveleys, I suppose. But I really don't know. Families are so mixed nowadays. Indeed, as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Mrs. Cheveley? I seem to know the name.

LADY MARKBY

She has just arrived from Vienna.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Ah! yes. I think I know whom you mean.

LADY MARKBY

Oh! she goes everywhere there, and has such pleasant scandals about all her friends. I really must go to Vienna next winter. I hope there is a good chef at the Embassy.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

If there is not, the Ambassador will certainly

have to be recalled. Pray point out Mrs. Cheveley to me. I should like to see her.

LADY MARKBY

Let me introduce you. [*To Mrs. Cheveley.*] My dear, Sir Robert is dying to know you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Bowing.*] Everyone is dying to know the brilliant Mrs. Cheveley. Our attachés at Vienna write to us about nothing else.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thank you, Sir Robert. An acquaintance that begins with a compliment is sure to develop into a real friendship. It starts in the right manner. And I find that I know Lady Chiltern already.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Really?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. She has just reminded me that we were at school together. I remember it perfectly now. She always got the good conduct prize. I have a distinct recollection of Lady Chiltern always getting the good conduct prize!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Smiling.*] And what prizes did you get, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

My prizes came a little later on in life. I don't think any of them were for good conduct. I forget!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am sure they were for something charming!

MRS. CHEVELEY

I don't know that women are always rewarded for being charming. I think they are usually punished for it! Certainly, more women grow old nowadays through the faithfulness of their admirers than through anything else! At least that is the only way I can account for the terribly haggard look of most of your pretty women in London!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What an appalling philosophy that sounds! To attempt to classify you, Mrs. Cheveley, would be an impertinence. But may I ask, at heart, are you an optimist or a pessimist? Those

seem to be the only two fashionable religions left to us nowadays.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, I'm neither. Optimism begins in a broad grin, and Pessimism ends with blue spectacles. Besides, they are both of them merely poses.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You prefer to be natural?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What would those modern psychological novelists, of whom we hear so much, say to such a theory as that?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Ah! the strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analyzed, women . . . merely adored.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And women represent the irrational.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Well-dressed women do.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a polite bow.*] I fear I could hardly agree with you there. But do sit down. And now tell me, what makes you leave your brilliant Vienna for our gloomy London—or perhaps the question is indiscreet?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Well, at any rate, may I know if it is politics or pleasure?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Politics are my only pleasure. You see nowadays it is not fashionable to flirt till one is

forty, or to be romantic till one is forty-five, so we poor women who are under thirty, or say we are, have nothing open to us but politics or philanthropy. And philanthropy seems to me to have become simply the refuge of people who wish to annoy their fellow-creatures. I prefer politics. I think they are more . . . becoming!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

A political life is a noble career!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Sometimes. And sometimes it is a clever game, Sir Robert. And sometimes it is a great nuisance.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Which do you find it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

I? A combination of all three. [*Drops her fan.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Picks up fan.*] Allow me!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

But you have not told me yet what makes you honour London so suddenly. Our season is almost over.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh! I don't care about the London season! It is too matrimonial. People are either hunting for husbands, or hiding from them. I wanted to meet you. It is quite true. You know what a woman's curiosity is. Almost as great as a man's! I wanted immensely to meet you, and . . . to ask you to do something for me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I hope it is not a little thing, Mrs. Cheveley. I find that little things are so very difficult to do.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*After a moment's reflection.*] No, I don't think it is quite a little thing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am so glad. Do tell me what it is.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Later on. [*Rises.*] And now may I walk through your beautiful house? I hear your pictures are charming. Poor Baron Arnheim—you remember the Baron?—used to tell me you had some wonderful Corots.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With an almost imperceptible start.*] Did you know Baron Arnheim well?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Smiling.*] Intimately. Did you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

At one time.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Wonderful man, wasn't he?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*After a pause.*] He was very remarkable, in many ways.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I often think it such a pity he never wrote his memoirs. They would have been most interesting.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes: he knew men and cities well, like the old Greek.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Without the dreadful disadvantage of having a Penelope waiting at home for him.

MASON

Lord Goring.

[*Enter Lord Goring. Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Good evening, my dear Arthur! Mrs. Cheveley, allow me to introduce to you Lord Goring, the idlest man in London.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I have met Lord Goring before.

LORD GORING

[*Bowing.*] I did not think you would remember me, Mrs. Cheveley.

MRS. CHEVELEY

My memory is under admirable control. And are you still a bachelor?

LORD GORING

I . . . believe so.

MRS. CHEVELEY

How very romantic!

LORD GORING

Oh! I am not at all romantic. I am not old enough. I leave romance to my seniors.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Lord Goring is the result of Boodle's Club, Mrs. Cheveley.

MRS. CHEVELEY

He reflects every credit on the institution.

LORD GORING

May I ask are you staying in London long?

MRS. CHEVELEY

That depends partly on the weather, partly on the cooking, and partly on Sir Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You are not going to plunge us into a European war, I hope?

MRS. CHEVELEY

There is no danger, at present!

[*She nods to Lord Goring, with a look of amusement in her eyes, and goes out with Sir Robert Chiltern. Lord Goring saunters over to Mabel Chiltern.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

You are very late!

LORD GORING

Have you missed me?

MABEL CHILTERN

Awfully!

LORD GORING

Then I am sorry I did not stay away longer. I like being missed.

MABEL CHILTERN

How very selfish of you!

LORD GORING

I am very selfish.

MABEL CHILTERN

You are always telling me of your bad qualities, Lord Goring.

LORD GORING

I have only told you half of them as yet, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

Are the others very bad?

LORD GORING

Quite dreadful! When I think of them at night I go to sleep at once.

MABEL CHILTERN

Well, I delight in your bad qualities. I wouldn't have you part with one of them.

LORD GORING

How very nice of you! But then you are always nice. By the way, I want to ask you a question, Miss Mabel. Who brought Mrs.

Cheveley here? That woman in heliotrope, who has just gone out of the room with your brother?

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh, I think Lady Markby brought her. Why do you ask?

LORD GORING

I hadn't seen her for years, that is all.

MABEL CHILTERN

What an absurd reason!

LORD GORING

All reasons are absurd.

MABEL CHILTERN

What sort of woman is she?

LORD GORING

Oh! a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night!

MABEL CHILTERN

I dislike her already.

LORD GORING

That shows your admirable good taste.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

[*Approaching.*] Ah, the English young lady is the dragon of good taste, is she not? Quite the dragon of good taste.

LORD GORING

So the newspapers are always telling us.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

I read all your English newspapers. I find them so amusing.

LORD GORING

Then, my dear Nanjac, you must certainly read between the lines.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

I should like to, but my professor objects. [*To Mabel Chiltern.*] May I have the pleasure of escorting you to the music-room, Mademoiselle?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Looking very disappointed.*] Delighted, Vicomte, quite delighted! [*Turning to Lord Goring.*] Aren't you coming to the music-room?

LORD GORING

Not if there is any music going on, Miss Mabel.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Severely.*] The music is in German. You would not understand it.

[*Goes out with the Vicomte de Nanjac. Lord Caversham comes up to his son.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir! what are you doing here? Wasting your life as usual! You should be in bed, sir. You keep too late hours! I heard of you the other night at Lady Rufford's dancing till four o'clock in the morning!

LORD GORING

Only a quarter to four, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Can't make out how you stand London Society. The thing has gone to the dogs, a lot of damned nobodies talking about nothing.

LORD GORING

I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You seem to me to be living entirely for pleasure.

LORD GORING

What else is there to live for, father? Nothing ages like happiness.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You are heartless, sir, very heartless!

LORD GORING

I hope not, father. Good evening, Lady Basildon!

LADY BASILDON

[*Arching two pretty eyebrows.*] Are you here? I had no idea you ever came to political parties!

LORD GORING

I adore political parties. They are the only place left to us where people don't talk politics.

LADY BASILDON

I delight in talking politics. I talk them all day long. But I can't bear listening to them. I don't know how the unfortunate men in the House stand these long debates.

LORD GORING

By never listening.

LADY BASILDON

Really?

LORD GORING

[*In his most serious manner.*] Of course. You see, it is a very dangerous thing to listen. If one listens one may be convinced; and a man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person.

LADY BASILDON

Ah! that accounts for so much in men that I have never understood, and so much in women that their husbands never appreciate in them!

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*With a sigh.*] Our husbands never appreciate anything in us. We have to go to others for that!

LADY BASILDON

[*Emphatically.*] Yes, always to others, have we not?

LORD GORING

[*Smiling.*] And those are the views of the

two ladies who are known to have the most admirable husbands in London.

MRS. MARCHMONT

That is exactly what we can't stand. My Reginald is quite hopelessly faultless. He is really unendurably so, at times! There is not the smallest element of excitement in knowing him.

LORD GORING

How terrible! Really, the thing should be more widely known!

LADY BASILDON

Basildon is quite as bad; he is as domestic as if he was a bachelor.

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Pressing Lady Basildon's hand.*] My poor Olivia! We have married perfect husbands, and we are well punished for it.

LORD GORING

I should have thought it was the husbands who were punished.

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Drawing herself up.*] Oh, dear, no! They

are as happy as possible! And as for trusting us, it is tragic how much they trust us.

LADY BASILDON

Perfectly tragic!

LORD GORING

Or comic, Lady Basildon?

LADY BASILDON

Certainly not comic, Lord Goring. How unkind of you to suggest such a thing!

MRS MARCHMONT

I am afraid Lord Goring is in the camp of the enemy, as usual. I saw him talking to that Mrs. Cheveley when he came in.

LORD GORING

Handsome woman, Mrs. Cheveley!

LADY BASILDON

[*Stiffly.*] Please don't praise other women in our presence. You might wait for us to do that!

LORD GORING

I did wait.

MRS. MARCHMONT

Well, we are not going to praise her. I hear she went to the Opera on Monday night, and told Tommy Rufford at supper that, as far as she could see, London Society was entirely made up of dowdies and dandies.

LORD GORING

She is quite right, too. The men are all dowdies and the women are all dandies, aren't they? [*After a pause.*] Oh! do you really think that is what Mrs. Cheveley meant?

MRS. MARCHMONT

Of course. And a very sensible remark for Mrs. Cheveley to make, too.

[*Enter Mabel Chiltern. She joins the group.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Why are you talking about Mrs. Cheveley? Everybody is talking about Mrs. Cheveley! Lord Goring says—what did you say, Lord Goring, about Mrs. Cheveley? Oh! I remember, that she was a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night.

LADY BASILDON

What a horrid combination! So very unnatural!

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*In her most dreamy manner.*] I like looking at geniuses, and listening to beautiful people.

LORD GORING

Ah! that is morbid of you, Mrs. Marchmont!

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Brightening to a look of real pleasure.*] I am so glad to hear you say that. Marchmont and I have been married for seven years, and he has never once told me that I was morbid. Men are so painfully unobservant!

LADY BASILDON

[*Turning to her.*] I have always said, dear Margaret, that you were the most morbid person in London.

MRS. MARCHMONT

Ah!-but you are always sympathetic, Olivia!

MABEL CHILTERN

Is it morbid to have a desire for food? I have

a great desire for food. Lord Goring, will you give me some supper?

LORD GORING

With pleasure, Miss Mabel. [*Moves away with her.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

How horrid you have been! You have never talked to me the whole evening!

LORD GORING

How could I? You went away with the child-diplomatist.

MABEL CHILTERN

You might have followed us. Pursuit would have been only polite. I don't think I like you at all this evening!

LORD GORING

I like you immensely.

MABEL CHILTERN

Well, I wish you'd show it in a more marked way! [*They go downstairs.*]

MRS. MARCHMONT

Olivia, I have a curious feeling of absolute

faintness. I think I should like some supper very much. I know I should like some supper.

LADY BASILDON

I am positively dying for supper, Margaret!

MRS. MARCHMONT

Men are so horribly selfish, they never think of these things.

LADY BASILDON

Men are grossly material, grossly material! [*The Vicomte de Nanjac enters from the music-room with some other guests. After having carefully examined all the people present, he approaches Lady Basildon.*]

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

May I have the honour of taking you down to supper, Comtesse?

LADY BASILDON

[*Coldly.*] I never take supper, thank you, Vicomte. [*The Vicomte is about to retire. Lady Basildon, seeing this, rises at once and takes his arm.*] But I will come down with you with pleasure.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

I am so fond of eating! I am very English in all my tastes.

LADY BASILDON

You look quite English, Vicomte, quite English.

[*They pass out. Mr. Montford, a perfectly-groomed young dandy, approaches Mrs. Marchmont.*]

MR. MONTFORD

Like some supper, Mrs. Marchmont?

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Languidly.*] Thank you, Mr. Montford, I never touch supper. [*Rises hastily and takes his arm.*] But I will sit beside you, and watch you.

MR. MONTFORD

I don't know that I like being watched when I am eating!

MRS. MARCHMONT

Then I will watch some one else.

MR. MONTFORD

I don't know that I should like that either.

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Severely.*] Pray, Mr. Montford, do not make these painful scenes of jealousy in public!

[*They go downstairs with the other guests, passing Sir Robert Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley, who now enter.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And are you going to any of our country houses before you leave England, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, no! I can't stand your English house-parties. In England people actually try to be brilliant at breakfast. That is so dreadful of them! Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast. And then the family skeleton is always reading family prayers. My stay in England really depends on you, Sir Robert. [*Sits down on the sofa.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Taking a seat beside her.*] Seriously?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Quite seriously. I want to talk to you about a great political and financial scheme, about this Argentine Canal Company, in fact.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What a tedious, practical subject for you to talk about, Mrs. Cheveley!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, I like tedious, practical subjects. What I don't like are tedious, practical people. There is a wide difference. Besides, you are interested, I know, in International Canal schemes. You were Lord Radley's secretary, weren't you, when the Government bought the Suez Canal shares?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes. But the Suez Canal was a very great and splendid undertaking. It gave us our direct route to India. It had imperial value. It was necessary that we should have control. This Argentine scheme is a commonplace Stock Exchange swindle.

MRS. CHEVELEY

A speculation, Sir Robert! A brilliant, daring speculation.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Believe me, Mrs. Cheveley, it is a swindle. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes matters simpler. We have all the information about it at the Foreign Office. In fact, I sent out a special Commission to inquire into the matter privately, and they report that the works are hardly begun, and as for the money already subscribed, no one seems to know what has become of it. The whole thing is a second Panama, and with not a quarter of the chance of success that miserable affair ever had. I hope you have not invested in it. I am sure you are far too clever to have done that.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I have invested very largely in it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Who could have advised you to do such a foolish thing?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Your old friend—and mine.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Who?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Baron Arnheim.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Frowning.*] Ah! yes. I remember hearing, at the time of his death, that he had been mixed up in the whole affair.

MRS. CHEVELEY

It was his last romance. His last but one, to do him justice.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] But you have not seen my Corots yet. They are in the music-room. Corots seem to go with music, don't they? May I show them to you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Shaking her head.*] I am not in a mood to-night for silver twilights, or rose-pink dawns. I want to talk business. [*Motions to him with her fan to sit down again beside her.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I fear I have no advice to give you, Mrs. Cheveley, except to interest yourself in something less dangerous. The success of the Canal depends, of course, on the attitude of England, and I am going to lay the report of the Commissioners before the House to-morrow night.

MRS. CHEVELEY

That you must not do. In your own interests, Sir Robert, to say nothing of mine, you must not do that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Looking at her in wonder.*] In my own interests? My dear Mrs. Cheveley, what do you mean? [*Sits down beside her.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Sir Robert, I will be quite frank with you. I want you to withdraw the report that you had intended to lay before the House, on the ground that you have reasons to believe that the Commissioners have been prejudiced or misinformed, or something. Then I want you to say a few words to the effect that the Government is going to reconsider the question, and

that you have reason to believe that the Canal, if completed, will be of great international value. You know the sort of things ministers say in cases of this kind. A few ordinary platitudes will do. In modern life nothing produces such an effect as a good platitude. It makes the whole world kin. Will you do that for me?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Mrs Cheveley, you cannot be serious in making me such a proposition!

MRS. CHEVELEY

I am quite serious.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Coldly.*] Pray allow me to believe that you are not!

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Speaking with great deliberation and emphasis.*] Ah! but I am. And, if you do what I ask you, I . . . will pay you very handsomely!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Pay me!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am afraid I don't quite understand what you mean.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Leaning back on the sofa and looking at him.*] How very disappointing! And I have come all the way from Vienna in order that you should thoroughly understand me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I fear I don't.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*In her most nonchalant manner.*] My dear Sir Robert, you are a man of the world, and you have your price, I suppose. Everybody has nowadays. The drawback is that most people are so dreadfully expensive. I know I am. I hope you will be more reasonable in your terms.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rises indignantly.*] If you will allow me, I will call your carriage for you. You have lived so long abroad, Mrs. Cheveley, that you

seem to be unable to realize that you are talking to an English gentleman.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Detains him by touching his arm with her fan, and keeping it there while she is talking.*] I realize that I am talking to a man who laid the foundation of his fortune by selling to a Stock Exchange speculator a Cabinet secret.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Biting his lip.*] What do you mean?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Rising and facing him.*] I mean that I know the real origin of your wealth and your career, and I have got your letter, too.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What letter?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Contemptuously.*] The letter you wrote to Baron Arnheim, when you were Lord Radley's secretary, telling the Baron to buy Suez Canal shares—a letter written three days before the Government announced its own purchase.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Hoarsely.*] It is not true.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You thought that letter had been destroyed. How foolish of you! It is in my possession.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

The affair to which you allude was no more than a speculation. The House of Commons had not yet passed the bill; it might have been rejected.

MRS. CHEVELEY

It was a swindle, Sir Robert. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes everything simpler. And now I am going to sell you that letter, and the price I ask for it is your public support of the Argentine scheme. You made your own fortune out of one canal. You must help me and my friends to make our fortunes out of another!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It is infamous, what you propose—infamous!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, no! This is the game of life as we all have to play it, Sir Robert, sooner or later.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I cannot do what you ask me.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You mean you cannot help doing it. You know you are standing on the edge of a precipice. And it is not for you to make terms. It is for you to accept them. Suppose you refuse——

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What then?

MRS. CHEVELEY

My dear Sir Robert, what then! You are ruined, that is all! Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. In fact, to be a bit better than one's neighbour was considered excessively vulgar and middle-class. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility,

and all the other seven deadly virtues—and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins—one after the other. Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing. Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man—now they crush him. And yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn't survive it. If it were known that as a young man, secretary to a great and important minister, you sold a Cabinet secret for a large sum of money, and that that was the origin of your wealth and career, you would be hounded out of public life, you would disappear completely. And after all, Sir Robert, why should you sacrifice your entire future rather than deal diplomatically with your enemy? For the moment I am your enemy. I admit it! And I am much stronger than you are. The big battalions are on my side. You have a splendid position, but it is your splendid position that makes you so vulnerable. You can't defend it. And I am in attack. Of course I have not talked morality to you. You must admit in fairness that I have spared you that. Years ago you did a clever, unscrupulous thing; it turned out a great success. You owe to it your fortune and position. And

now you have got to pay for it. Sooner or later we all have to pay for what we do. You have to pay now. Before I leave you to-night, you have got to promise me to suppress your report, and to speak in the House in favour of this scheme.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What you ask is impossible.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You must make it possible. You are going to make it possible. Sir Robert, you know what your English newspapers are like. Suppose that when I leave this house I drive down to some newspaper office, and give them this scandal and the proofs of it! Think of their loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in dragging you down, of the mud and mire they would plunge you in. Think of the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article, and arranging the foulness of the public placard.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Stop! You want me to withdraw the report and to make a short speech stating that I believe there are possibilities in the scheme?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Sitting down on the sofa.*] Those are my terms.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*In a low voice.*] I will give you any sum of money you want.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Even you are not rich enough, Sir Robert, to buy back your past. No man is.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I will not do what you ask me. I will not.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You have to. If you don't . . . [*Rises from the sofa.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Bewildered and unnerved.*] Wait a moment! What did you propose? You said that you would give me back my letter, didn't you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. That is agreed. I will be in the Ladies' Gallery to-morrow night at half-past eleven. If by that time—and you will have had heaps of opportunity—you have made an announcement to the House in the terms I wish, I shall hand

you back your letter with the prettiest thanks, and the best, or at any rate the most suitable, compliment I can think of. I intend to play quite fairly with you. One should always play fairly . . . when one has the winning cards. The Baron taught me that . . . amongst other things.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You must let me have time to consider your proposal.

MRS. CHEVELEY

No; you must settle now!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Give me a week—three days!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Impossible! I have got to telegraph to Vienna to-night.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My God! what brought you into my life?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Circumstances. [*Moves towards the door.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Don't go. I consent. The report shall be withdrawn. I will arrange for a question to be put to me on the subject.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thank you. I knew we should come to an amicable agreement. I understood your nature from the first. I analyzed you, though you did not adore me. And now you can get my carriage for me, Sir Robert. I see the people coming up from supper, and Englishmen always get romantic after a meal, and that bores me dreadfully.

[*Exit Sir Robert Chiltern.*]

[*Enter Guests, Lady Chiltern, Lady Markby, Lord Caversham, Lady Basildon, Mrs. Marchmont, Vicomte de Nanjac, Mr. Montford.*]

LADY MARKBY

Well, dear Mrs. Cheveley, I hope you have enjoyed yourself. Sir Robert is very entertaining, is he not?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Most entertaining! I have enjoyed my talk with him immensely.

LADY MARKBY

He has had a very interesting and brilliant career. And he has married a most admirable wife. Lady Chiltern is a woman of the very highest principles, I am glad to say. I am a little too old now, myself, to trouble about setting a good example, but I always admire people who do. And Lady Chiltern has a very ennobling effect on life, though her dinner-parties are rather dull sometimes. But one can't have everything, can one? And now I must go, dear. Shall I call for you to-morrow?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks.

LADY MARKBY

We might drive in the Park at five. Everything looks so fresh in the Park now!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Except the people!

LADY MARKBY

Perhaps the people are a little jaded. I have often observed that the Season as it goes on produces a kind of softening of the brain. How-

ever, I think anything is better than high intellectual pressure. That is the most unbecoming thing there is. It makes the noses of the young girls so particularly large. And there is nothing so difficult to marry as a large nose, men don't like them. Good-night, dear! [*To Lady Chiltern.*] Good-night, Gertrude! [*Goes out on Lord Caversham's arm.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

What a charming house you have, Lady Chiltern! I have spent a delightful evening. It has been so interesting getting to know your husband.

LADY CHILTERN

Why did you wish to meet my husband, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, I will tell you. I wanted to interest him in this Argentine Canal scheme, of which I dare say you have heard. And I found him most susceptible—susceptible to reason, I mean. A rare thing in a man. I converted him in ten minutes. He is going to make a speech in the House to-morrow night in favour of the idea.

We must go to the Ladies' Gallery and hear him! It will be a great occasion!

LADY CHILTERN

There must be some mistake. That scheme could never have my husband's support.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, I assure you it's all settled. I don't regret my tedious journey from Vienna now. It has been a great success. But, of course, for the next twenty-four hours the whole thing is a dead secret.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Gently.*] A secret? Between whom?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a flash of amusement in her eyes.*] Between your husband and myself.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Entering.*] Your carriage is here, Mrs. Cheveley!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks! Good evening, Lady Chiltern!

Good-night, Lord Goring! I am at Claridge's. Don't you think you might leave a card?

LORD GORING

If you wish it, Mrs. Cheveley!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, don't be so solemn about it, or I shall be obliged to leave a card on you. In England I suppose that would be hardly considered *en règle*. Abroad, we are more civilized. Will you see me down, Sir Robert? Now that we have both the same interests at heart we shall be great friends, I hope!

[*Sails out on Sir Robert Chiltern's arm. Lady Chiltern goes to the top of the staircase and looks down at them as they descend. Her expression is troubled. After a little time she is joined by some of the guests, and passes with them into another reception-room.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

What a horrid woman!

LORD GORING

You should go to bed, Miss Mabel.

MABEL CHILTERN

Lord Goring!

LORD GORING

My father told me to go to bed an hour ago. I don't see why I shouldn't give you the same advice. I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself.

MABEL CHILTERN

Lord Goring, you are always ordering me out of the room. I think it most courageous of you. Especially as I am not going to bed for hours. [*Goes over to the sofa.*] You can come and sit down if you like, and talk about anything in the world, except the Royal Academy, Mrs. Cheveley, or novels in the Scotch dialect. They are not improving subjects. [*Catches sight of something that is lying on the sofa half-hidden by the cushion.*] What is this? Some one has dropped a diamond brooch! Quite beautiful, isn't it? [*Shows it to him.*] I wish it was mine, but Gertrude won't let me wear anything but pearls, and I am thoroughly sick of pearls. They make me look so plain, so good

and so intellectual. I wonder whom the brooch belongs to.

LORD GORING

I wonder who dropped it.

MABEL CHILTERN

It is a beautiful brooch.

LORD GORING

It is a handsome bracelet.

MABEL CHILTERN

It isn't a bracelet. It's a brooch.

LORD GORING

It can be used as a bracelet. [*Takes it from her, and, pulling out a green letter-case, puts the ornament carefully in it, and replaces the whole thing in his breast-pocket with the most perfect sangfroid.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

What are you doing?

LORD GORING

Miss Mabel, I am going to make a rather strange request to you.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Eagerly.*] Oh, pray do! I have been waiting for it all the evening.

LORD GORING

[*Is a little taken aback, but recovers himself.*] Don't mention to anybody that I have taken charge of this brooch. Should anyone write and claim it, let me know at once.

MABEL CHILTERN

That is a strange request.

LORD GORING

Well, you see I gave this brooch to somebody once, years ago.

MABEL CHILTERN

You did?

LORD GORING

Yes.

[*Lady Chiltern enters alone. The other guests have gone.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Then I shall certainly bid you good-night. Good-night, Gertrude! [*Exit.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Good-night, dear! [*To Lord Goring.*] You saw whom Lady Markby brought here to-night.

LORD GORING

Yes. It was an unpleasant surprise. What did she come here for?

LADY CHILTERN

Apparently to try and lure Robert to uphold some fraudulent scheme in which she is interested. The Argentine Canal, in fact.

LORD GORING

She has mistaken her man, hasn't she?

LADY CHILTERN

She is incapable of understanding an upright nature like my husband's!

LORD GORING

Yes. I should fancy she came to grief if she tried to get Robert into her toils. It is extraordinary what astounding mistakes clever women make.

LADY CHILTERN

I don't call women of that kind clever. I call them stupid!

LORD GORING

Same thing often. Good-night, Lady Chiltern!

LADY CHILTERN

Good-night!

[*Enter Sir Robert Chiltern.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My dear Arthur, you are not going? Do stop a little!

LORD GORING

Afraid I can't, thanks. I have promised to look in at the Hartlocks. I believe they have got a mauve Hungarian band that plays mauve Hungarian music. See you soon. Good-bye!

[*Exit.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

How beautiful you look to-night, Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

Robert, it is not true, is it? You are not going to lend your support to this Argentine speculation? You couldn't!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Starting.*] Who told you I intended to do so?

LADY CHILTERN

That woman who has just gone out, Mrs. Cheveley, as she calls herself now. She seemed to taunt me with it. Robert, I know this woman. You don't. We were at school together. She was untruthful, dishonest, an evil influence on everyone whose trust or friendship she could win. I hated, I despised her. She stole things, she was a thief. She was sent away for being a thief. Why do you let her influence you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude, what you tell me may be true, but it happened many years ago. It is best forgotten! Mrs. Cheveley may have changed since then. No one should be entirely judged by their past.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Sadly.*] One's past is what one is. It is the only way by which people should be judged.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

That is a hard saying, Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

It is a true saying, Robert. And what did she mean by boasting that she had got you to lend your support, your name to a thing I have heard you describe as the most dishonest and fraudulent scheme there has ever been in political life?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Biting his lip.*] I was mistaken in the view I took. We all may make mistakes.

LADY CHILTERN

But you told me yesterday that you had received the report from the Commission, and that it entirely condemned the whole thing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Walking up and down.*] I have reasons now to believe that the Commission was prejudiced, or, at any rate, misinformed. Besides, Gertrude, public and private life are different things. They have different laws and move on different lines.

LADY CHILTERN

They should both represent man at his highest. I see no difference between them.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Stopping.*] In the present case, on a matter of practical politics, I have changed my mind. That is all.

LADY CHILTERN

All!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Sternly.*] Yes!

LADY CHILTERN

Robert! Oh! it is horrible that I should have to ask you such a question—Robert, are you telling me the whole truth?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Why do you ask me such a question?

LADY CHILTERN

[*After a pause.*] Why do you not answer it?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Sitting down.*] Gertrude, truth is a very complex thing, and politics is a very complex business. There are wheels within wheels. One may be under certain obligations to people that one must pay. Sooner or later in political life one has to compromise. Everyone does.

LADY CHILTERN

Compromise? Robert, why do you talk so differently to-night from the way I have always heard you talk? Why are you changed?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am not changed. But circumstances alter things.

LADY CHILTERN

Circumstances should never alter principles.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

But if I told you——

LADY CHILTERN

What?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

That it was necessary, vitally necessary.

LADY CHILTERN

It can never be necessary to do what is not honourable. Or if it be necessary, then what is it that I have loved! But it is not, Robert; tell me it is not. Why should it be? What gain would you get? Money? We have no need of that! And money that comes from a tainted

source is a degradation. Power? But power is nothing in itself. It is power to do good that is fine—that, and that only. What is it, then? Robert, tell me why you are going to do this dishonourable thing!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude, you have no right to use that word. I told you it was a question of rational compromise. It is no more than that.

LADY CHILTERN

Robert, that is all very well for other men, for men who treat life simply as a sordid speculation; but not for you, Robert, not for you. You are different. All your life you have stood apart from others. You have never let the world soil you. To the world, as to myself, you have been an ideal always. Oh! be that ideal still. That great inheritance throw not away—that tower of ivory do not destroy. Robert, men can love what is beneath them—things unworthy, stained, dishonoured. We women worship when we love; and when we lose our worship, we lose everything. Oh! don't kill my love for you, don't kill that!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

I know that there are men with horrible secrets in their lives—men who have done some shameful thing, and who in some critical moment have to pay for it, by doing some other act of shame—oh! don't tell me you are such as they are! Robert, is there in your life any secret dishonour or disgrace? Tell me, tell me at once, that——

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

That what?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Speaking very slowly.*] That our lives may drift apart.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Drift apart?

LADY CHILTERN

That they may be entirely separate. It would be better for us both.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude, there is nothing in my past life that you might not know.

LADY CHILTERN

I was sure of it, Robert. I was sure of it. But why did you say those dreadful things, things so unlike your real self? Don't let us ever talk about the subject again. You will write, won't you, to Mrs. Cheveley, and tell her that you cannot support this scandalous scheme of hers? If you have given her any promise you must take it back, that is all!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Must I write and tell her that?

LADY CHILTERN

Surely, Robert! What else is there to do?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I might see her personally. It would be better.

LADY CHILTERN

You must never see her again, Robert. She is not a woman you should ever speak to. She is not worthy to talk to a man like you. No;

you must write to her at once, now, this moment, and let your letter show her that your decision is quite irrevocable!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Write this moment!

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

But it is so late. It is close on twelve.

LADY CHILTERN

That makes no matter. She must know at once that she has been mistaken in you—and that you are not a man to do anything base or underhand or dishonourable. Write her, Robert. Write that you decline to support this scheme of hers, as you hold it to be a dishonest scheme. Yes—write the word dishonest. She knows what that word means. [*Sir Robert Chiltern sits down and writes a letter. His wife takes it up and reads it.*] Yes; that will do. [*Rings bell.*] And now the envelope. [*He writes the envelope slowly. Enter Mason.*] Have this letter sent at once to Claridge's Hotel. There is no answer. [*Exit Mason. Lady Chiltern*

kneels down beside her husband and puts her arms round him.] Robert, love gives one a sort of instinct to things. I feel to-night that I have saved you from something that might have been a danger to you, from something that might have made men honour you less than they do. I don't think you realize sufficiently, Robert, that you have brought into the political life of our time a nobler atmosphere, a finer attitude towards life, a freer air of purer aims and higher ideals—I know it, and for that I love you, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh, love me always, Gertrude, love me always!

LADY CHILTERN

I will love you always, because you will always be worthy of love. We needs must love the highest when we see it! [*Kisses him and rises and goes out.*]

[*Sir Robert Chiltern walks up and down for a moment; then sits down and buries his face in his hands. The servant enters and begins putting out the lights. Sir Robert Chiltern looks up.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Put out the lights, Mason, put out the lights.

[*The Servant puts out the lights. The room becomes almost dark. The only light there is comes from the great chandelier that hangs over the staircase and illumes the tapestry of the Triumph of Love.*]

ACT-DROP.

SECOND ACT

SCENE—*Morning-room at Sir Robert Chiltern's house.*

[*Lord Goring, dressed in the height of fashion, is lounging in an armchair. Sir Robert Chiltern is standing in front of the fireplace. He is evidently in a state of great mental excitement and distress. As the scene progresses he paces nervously up and down the room.*]

LORD GORING

My dear Robert, it's a very awkward business, very awkward indeed. You should have told your wife the whole thing. Secrets from other people's wives are a necessary luxury in modern life. So, at least, I am always told at the club by people who are bald enough to know better. But no man should have a secret from his own wife. She invariably finds it out. Wo-

men have a wonderful instinct about things. They can discover everything except the obvious.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur, I couldn't tell my wife. When could I have told her? Not last night. It would have made a life-long separation between us, and I would have lost the love of the one woman in the world I worship, of the only woman who has ever stirred love within me. Last night it would have been quite impossible. She would have turned from me in horror . . . in horror and in contempt.

LORD GORING

Is Lady Chiltern as perfect as all that?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes; my wife is as perfect as all that.

LORD GORING

[*Taking off his left-hand glove.*] What a pity! I beg your pardon, my dear fellow, I didn't quite mean that. But if what you tell me is true, I should like to have a serious talk about life with Lady Chiltern.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It would be quite useless.

LORD GORING

May I try?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes; but nothing could make her alter her views.

LORD GORING

Well, at the worst it would simply be a psychological experiment.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

All such experiments are terribly dangerous.

LORD GORING

Everything is dangerous, my dear fellow. If it wasn't so, life wouldn't be worth living. . . . Well, I am bound to say that I think you should have told her years ago.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

When? When we were engaged? Do you think she would have married me if she had known that the origin of my fortune is such as it is, the basis of my career such as it is, and

that I had done a thing that I suppose most men would call shameful and dishonourable?

LORD GORING

[*Slowly.*] Yes; most men would call it ugly names. There is no doubt of that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Bitterly.*] Men who every day do something of the same kind themselves. Men who, each one of them, have worse secrets in their own lives.

LORD GORING

That is the reason they are so pleased to find out other people's secrets. It distracts public attention from their own.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And, after all, whom did I wrong by what I did? No one.

LORD GORING

[*Looking at him steadily.*] Except yourself, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*After a pause.*] Of course I had private in-

formation about a certain transaction contemplated by the Government of the day, and I acted on it. Private information is practically the source of every large modern fortune.

LORD GORING

[*Tapping his boot with his cane.*] And public scandal invariably the result.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Pacing up and down the room.*] Arthur, do you think that what I did nearly eighteen years ago should be brought up against me now? Do you think it fair that a man's whole career should be ruined for a fault done in one's boyhood almost. I was twenty-two at the time, and I had the double misfortune of being well-born and poor, two unforgivable things nowadays. Is it fair that the folly, the sin of one's youth, if men choose to call it a sin, should wreck a life like mine, should place me in the pillory, should shatter all that I have worked for, all that I have built up? Is it fair, Arthur?

LORD GORING

Life is never fair, Robert. And perhaps it is a good thing for most of us that it is not.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Every man of ambition has to fight his century with its own weapons. What this century worships is wealth. To succeed one must achieve wealth. At all costs one must have wealth.

LORD GORING

You underrate yourself, Robert. Believe me, without wealth you could have succeeded just as well.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

When I was old, perhaps. When I had lost my passion for power, or could not use it. When I was tired, worn out, disappointed. I wanted my success when I was young. Youth is the time for success. I couldn't wait.

LORD GORING

Well, you certainly have had your success while you are still young. No one in our day has had such a brilliant success. Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs at the age of forty—that's good enough for anyone, I should think.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And if it is all taken away from me now? If

I lose everything over a horrible scandal? If I am hounded from public life?

LORD GORING

Robert, how could you have sold yourself for money?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Excitedly.*] I did not sell myself for money. I bought success at a great price. That is all.

LORD GORING

[*Gravely.*] Yes; you certainly paid a great price for it. But what first made you think of doing such a thing?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Baron Arnheim.

LORD GORING

Damned scoundrel!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

No; he was a man of a most subtle and refined intellect. A man of culture, charm, and distinction. One of the most intellectual men I ever met.

LORD GORING

Ah! I prefer a gentlemanly fool any day. There is more to be said for stupidity than people imagine. Personally, I have a great admiration for stupidity. It is a sort of fellow-feeling, I suppose. But how did he do it? Tell me the whole thing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Throws himself into an armchair by the writing-table.*] One night after dinner at Lord Radley's the Baron began talking about success in modern life as something that one could reduce to an absolutely definite science. With that wonderfully fascinating quiet voice of his he expounded to us the most terrible of all philosophies, the philosophy of power, preached to us the most marvellous of all gospels, the gospel of gold. I think he saw the effect he had produced on me, for some days afterward he wrote and asked me to come and see him. He was living then in Park Lane, in the house Lord Woolcomb has now. I remember so well how, with a strange smile on his pale curved lips, he led me through his wonderful picture gallery, showed me his tapestries, his enamels, his jewels, his carved ivories, made me wonder at the strange

loveliness of the luxury in which he lived; and then told me that luxury was nothing but a background, a painted scene in a play, and that power, power over other men, power over the world was the one thing worth having, the one supreme pleasure worth knowing, the one toy one never tired of, and that in our century only the rich possessed it.

LORD GORING

[*With great deliberation.*] A thoroughly shallow creed.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] I didn't think so then. I don't think so now. Wealth has given me enormous power. It gave me at the very outset of my life freedom, and freedom is everything. You have never been poor, and never known what ambition is. You cannot understand what a wonderful chance the Baron gave me. Such a chance as few men get.

LORD GORING

Fortunately for them, if one is to judge by results. But tell me definitely, how did the Baron finally persuade you to—well, to do what you did?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

When I was going away he said to me that if I ever could give him any private information of real value he would make me a very rich man. I was dazed at the prospect he held out to me, and my ambition and my desire for power were at that time boundless. Six weeks later certain private documents passed through my hands.

LORD GORING

[*Keeping his eyes steadily fixed on the carpet.*] State documents?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes. [*Lord Goring sighs, then passes his hand across his forehead and looks up.*]

LORD GORING

I had no idea that you, of all men in the world, could have been so weak, Robert, as to yield to such a temptation as Baron Arnheim held out to you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Weak? Oh, I am sick of hearing that phrase.

Sick of using it about others. Weak? Do you really think, Arthur, that it is weakness that yields to temptation? I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to. To stake all one's life on a single moment, to risk everything on one throw, whether the stakes be power or pleasure, I care not—there is no weakness in that. There is a horrible, a terrible courage. I had that courage. I sat down the same afternoon and wrote Baron Arnheim the letter this woman now holds. He made three-quarters of a million over the transaction.

LORD GORING

And you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I received from the Baron £110,000.

LORD GORING

You were worth more, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

No; that money gave me exactly what I wanted, power over others. I went into the House immediately. The Baron advised me in finance

from time to time. Before five years I had almost trebled my fortune. Since then everything that I have touched has turned out a success. In all things connected with money I have had a luck so extraordinary that sometimes it has made me almost afraid. I remember having read somewhere, in some strange book, that when the gods wish to punish us they answer our prayers.

LORD GORING

But tell me, Robert, did you never suffer any regret for what you had done?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

No. I felt that I had fought the century with its own weapons, and won.

LORD GORING

[*Sadly.*] You thought you had won.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I thought so. [*After a long pause.*] Arthur, do you despise me for what I have told you?

LORD GORING

[*With deep feeling in his voice.*] I am very sorry for you, Robert, very sorry indeed.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I don't say that I suffered any remorse. I didn't. Not remorse in the ordinary, rather silly sense of the word. But I have paid conscience money many times. I had a wild hope that I might disarm destiny. The sum Baron Arnheim gave me I have distributed twice over in public charities since then.

LORD GORING

[*Looking up.*] In public charities? Dear me! what a lot of harm you must have done, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh, don't say that, Arthur; don't talk like that.

LORD GORING

Never mind what I say, Robert. I am always saying what I shouldn't say. In fact, I usually say what I really think. A great mistake nowadays. It makes one so liable to be misunderstood. As regards this dreadful business, I will help you in whatever way I can. Of course you know that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Thank you, Arthur, thank you. But what is to be done? What can be done?

LORD GORING

[*Leaning back with his hands in his pockets.*] Well, the English can't stand a man who is always saying he is in the right, but they are very fond of a man who admits that he has been in the wrong. It is one of the best things in them. However, in your case, Robert, a confession would not do. The money, if you will allow me to say so is . . . awkward. Besides, if you did make a clean breast of the whole affair, you would never be able to talk morality again. And in England a man who can't talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician. There would be nothing left for him as a profession except Botany or the Church. A confession would be of no use. It would ruin you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It would ruin me. Arthur, the only thing for me to do now is to fight the thing out.

LORD GORING

[*Rising from his chair.*] I was waiting for

you to say that, Robert. It is the only thing to do now. And you must begin by telling your wife the whole story.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

That I will not do.

LORD GORING

Robert, believe me, you are wrong.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I couldn't do it. It would kill her love for me. And now about this woman, this Mrs. Cheveley. How can I defend myself against her? You knew her before, Arthur, apparently.

LORD GORING

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Did you know her well?

LORD GORING

[*Arranging his necktie.*] So little that I got engaged to be married to her once, when I was staying at the Tenbys'. The affair lasted for three days . . . nearly.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Why was it broken off?

LORD GORING

[*Airily.*] Oh, I forget. At least, it makes no matter. By the way, have you tried her with money? She used to be confoundedly fond of money.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I offered her any sum she wanted. She refused.

LORD GORING

Then the marvellous gospel of gold breaks down sometimes. The rich can't do everything, after all.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Not everything. I suppose you are right. Arthur, I feel that public disgrace is in store for me. I feel certain of it. I never knew what terror was before. I know it now. It is as if a hand of ice were laid upon one's heart. It is as if one's heart were beating itself to death in some empty hollow.

LORD GORING

[*Striking the table.*] Robert, you must fight her. You must fight her.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

But how?

LORD GORING

I can't tell you how, at present. I have not the smallest idea. But everyone has some weak point. There is some flaw in each one of us. [*Strolls over to the fireplace and looks at himself in the glass.*] My father tells me that even I have faults. Perhaps I have. I don't know.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

In defending myself against Mrs. Cheveley, I have a right to use any weapon I can find, have I not?

LORD GORING

[*Still looking in the glass.*] In your place I don't think I should have the smallest scruple in doing so. She is thoroughly well able to take care of herself.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Sits down at the table and takes a pen in his*

hand.] Well, I shall send a cipher telegram to the Embassy at Vienna, to inquire if there is anything known against her. There may be some secret scandal she might be afraid of.

LORD GORING

[*Settling his buttonhole.*] Oh, I should fancy Mrs. Cheveley is one of those very modern women of our time who find a new scandal as becoming as a new bonnet, and air them both in the Park every afternoon at five-thirty. I am sure she adores scandals, and that the sorrow of her life at present is that she can't manage to have enough of them.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Writing.*] Why do you say that?

LORD GORING

[*Turning round.*] Well, she wore far too much rouge last night, and not quite enough clothes. That is always a sign of despair in a woman.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Striking a bell.*] But it is worth while my wiring to Vienna, is it not?

LORD GORING

It is always worth while asking a question, though it is not always worth while answering one.

[*Enter Mason.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Is Mr. Trafford in his room?

MASON

Yes, Sir Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Puts what he has written into an envelope, which he then carefully closes.*] Tell him to have this sent off in cipher at once. There must not be a moment's delay.

MASON

Yes, Sir Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh, just give that back to me again.

[*Writes something on the envelope. Mason then goes out with the letter.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

She must have had some curious hold over Baron Arnheim. I wonder what it was.

LORD GORING

[*Smiling.*] I wonder.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I will fight her to the death, as long as my wife knows nothing.

LORD GORING

[*Strongly.*] Oh, fight in any case—in any case.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a gesture of despair.*] If my wife found out, there would be little left to fight for. Well, as soon as I hear from Vienna, I shall let you know the result. It is a chance, just a chance, but I believe in it. And as I fought the age with its own weapons, I will fight her with her weapons. It is only fair, and she looks like a woman with a past, doesn't she?

LORD GORING

Most pretty women do. But there is a fashion in pasts just as there is a fashion in frocks. Per-

haps Mrs. Cheveley's past is merely a slightly *décolleté one*, and they are excessively popular nowadays. Besides, my dear Robert, I should not build too high hopes on frightening Mrs. Cheveley. I should not fancy Mrs. Cheveley is a woman who would be easily frightened. She has survived all her creditors, and she shows wonderful presence of mind.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh! I live on hopes now. I clutch at every chance. I feel like a man on a ship that is sinking. The water is round my feet, and the very air is bitter with storm. Hush! I hear my wife's voice.

[*Enter Lady Chiltern in walking dress.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Good afternoon, Lord Goring!

LORD GORING

Good afternoon, Lady Chiltern! Have you been in the park?

LADY CHILTERN

No: I have just come from the Woman's Liberal Association, where, by the way, Robert,

your name was received with loud applause, and now I have come in to have my tea. [*To Lord Goring.*] You will wait and have some tea, won't you?

LORD GORING

I'll wait for a short time, thanks.

LADY CHILTERN

I will be back in a moment. I am only going to take my hat off.

LORD GORING

[*In his most earnest manner.*] Oh! please don't. It is so pretty. One of the prettiest hats I ever saw. I hope the Woman's Liberal Association received it with loud applause.

LADY CHILTERN

[*With a smile.*] We have much more important work to do than to look at each other's bonnets, Lord Goring.

LORD GORING

Really? What sort of work?

LADY CHILTERN

Oh! dull, useful, delightful things, Factory

Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours' Bill, the Parliamentary Franchise. . . . Everything, in fact, that you would find thoroughly uninteresting.

LORD GORING

And never bonnets?

LADY CHILTERN

[*With mock indignation.*] Never bonnets, never.

[*Lady Chiltern goes out through the door leading to her boudoir.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Takes Lord Goring's hand.*] You have been a good friend to me, Arthur, a thoroughly good friend.

LORD GORING

I don't know that I have been able to do much for you, Robert, as yet. In fact, I have not been able to do anything for you, as far as I can see. I am thoroughly disappointed with myself.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You have enabled me to tell you the truth.

That is something. The truth has always stifled me.

LORD GORING

Ah! the truth is a thing I get rid of as soon as possible! Bad habit, by the way. Makes one very unpopular at the club. . . . with the older members. They call it being conceited. Perhaps it is.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I would to God that I had been able to tell the truth . . . to live the truth. Ah! that is the great thing in life, to live the truth. [*Sighs and goes towards the door.*] I'll see you soon again, Arthur, shan't I?

LORD GORING

Certainly. Whenever you like. I'm going to look in at the Bachelors' Ball to-night, unless I find something better to do. But I'll come round to-morrow morning. If you should want me to-night by any chance, send round a note to Curzon Street.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Thank you.

[*As he reaches the door, Lady Chiltern enters from her boudoir.*]

LADY CHILTERN

You are not going, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I have some letters to write, dear.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Going to him.*] You work too hard, Robert. You seem never to think of yourself, and you are looking so tired.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It is nothing, dear, nothing.

[*He kisses her and goes out.*]

LADY CHILTERN

[*To Lord Goring.*] Do sit down. I am so glad you have called. I want to talk to you about . . . well, not about bonnets, or the Woman's Liberal Association. You take far too much interest in the first subject, and not nearly enough in the second.

LORD GORING

You want to talk to me about Mrs. Cheveley?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes. You have guessed it. After you left last night I found out that what she had said was really true. Of course I made Robert write her a letter at once, withdrawing his promise.

LORD GORING

So he gave me to understand.

LADY CHILTERN

To have kept it would have been the first stain on a career that has been stainless always. Robert must be above reproach. He is not like other men. He cannot afford to do what other men do. [*She looks at Lord Goring, who remains silent.*] Don't you agree with me? You are Robert's greatest friend. You are our greatest friend, Lord Goring. No one, except myself, knows Robert better than you do. He has no secrets from me, and I don't think he has any from you.

LORD GORING

He certainly has no secrets from me. At least I don't think so.

LADY CHILTERN

Then am I not right in my estimate of him? I know I am right. But speak to me frankly.

LORD GORING

[*Looking straight at her.*] Quite frankly?

LADY CHILTERN

Surely. You have nothing to conceal, have you?

LORD GORING

Nothing. But, my dear Lady Chiltern, I think, if you will allow me to say so, that in practical life——

LADY CHILTERN

[*Smiling.*] Of which you know so little, Lord Goring——

LORD GORING

Of which I know nothing by experience, though I know something by observation. I think that in practical life there is something about success, actual success, that is a little unscrupulous, something about ambition that is unscrupulous always. Once a man has set his heart and soul on getting to a certain point, if

he has to climb the crag, he climbs the crag; if he has to walk in the mire——

LADY CHILTERN

Well?

LORD GORING

He walks in the mire. Of course I am only talking generally about life.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Gravely.*] I hope so. Why do you look at me so strangely, Lord Goring?

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern, I have sometimes thought that . . . perhaps you are a little hard in your views on life. I think that . . . often you don't make sufficient allowances. In every nature there are elements of weakness, or worse than weakness. Supposing, for instance, that—that any public man, my father, or Lord Merton, or Robert, say, had, years ago, written some foolish letter to some one . . .

LADY CHILTERN

What do you mean by a foolish letter?

LORD GORING

A letter gravely compromising one's position. I am only putting an imaginary case.

LADY CHILTERN

Robert is as incapable of doing a foolish thing as he is of doing a wrong thing.

LORD GORING

[*After a long pause.*] Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing.

LADY CHILTERN

Are you a Pessimist? What will the other dandies say? They will all have to go into mourning.

LORD GORING

[*Rising.*] No, Lady Chiltern, I am not a Pessimist. Indeed I am not sure that I quite know what Pessimism really means. All I do know is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity. It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world, whatever may be the explanation of the next. And if you

are ever in trouble, Lady Chiltern, trust me absolutely, and I will help you in every way I can. If you ever want me, come to me for my assistance, and you shall have it. Come at once to me.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Looking at him in surprise.*] Lord Goring, you are talking quite seriously. I don't think I ever heard you talk seriously before.

LORD GORING

[*Laughing.*] You must excuse me, Lady Chiltern. It won't occur again, if I can help it.

LADY CHILTERN

But I like you to be serious.

[*Enter Mabel Chiltern, in the most ravishing frock.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Dear Gertrude, don't say such a dreadful thing to Lord Goring. Seriousness would be very unbecoming to him. Good afternoon, Lord Goring! Pray be as trivial as you can.

LORD GORING

I should like to, Miss Mabel, but I am afraid I am . . . a little out of practice this morning; and besides, I have to be going now.

MABEL CHILTERN

Just when I have come in! What dreadful manners you have! I am sure you were very badly brought up.

LORD GORING

I was.

MABEL CHILTERN

I wish I had brought you up!

LORD GORING

I am so sorry you didn't.

MABEL CHILTERN

It is too late now, I suppose?

LORD GORING

[*Smiling.*] I am not so sure.

MABEL CHILTERN

Will you ride to-morrow morning?

LORD GORING

Yes, at ten.

MABEL CHILTERN

Don't forget.

LORD GORING

Of course I shan't. By the way, Lady Chiltern, there is no list of your guests in "The Morning Post" of to-day. It has apparently been crowded out by the County Council, or the Lambeth Conference, or something equally boring. Could you let me have a list? I have a particular reason for asking you.

LADY CHILTERN

I am sure Mr. Trafford will be able to give you one.

LORD GORING

Thanks, so much.

MABEL CHILTERN

Tommy is the most useful person in London.

LORD GORING

[*Turning to her.*] And who is the most ornamental?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Triumphantly.*] I am.

LORD GORING

How clever of you to guess it! [*Takes up his hat and cane.*] Good-bye, Lady Chiltern! You will remember what I said to you, won't you?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes; but I don't know why you said it to me.

LORD GORING

I hardly know myself. Good-bye, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a little move of disappointment.*] I wish you were not going. I have had four wonderful adventures this morning; four and a half, in fact. You might stop and listen to some of them.

LORD GORING

How very selfish of you to have four and a half! There won't be any left for me.

MABEL CHILTERN

I don't want you to have any. They would not be good for you.

LORD GORING

That is the first unkind thing you have ever said to me. How charmingly you said it! Ten to-morrow.

MABEL CHILTERN

Sharp.

LORD GORING

Quite sharp. But don't bring Mr. Trafford.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a little toss of the head.*] Of course I shan't bring Tommy Trafford. Tommy Trafford is in great disgrace.

LORD GORING

I am delighted to hear it. [*Bows and goes out.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Gertrude, I wish you would speak to Tommy Trafford.

LADY CHILTERN

What has poor Mr. Trafford done this time? Robert says he is the best secretary he has ever had.

MABEL CHILTERN

Well, Tommy has proposed to me again. Tommy really does nothing but propose to me. He proposed to me last night in the music-room, when I was quite unprotected, as there was an elaborate trio going on. I didn't dare to make the smallest repartee, I need hardly tell you. If I had, it would have stopped the music at once. Musical people are so absurdly unreasonable. They always want one to be perfectly dumb at the very moment when one is longing to be absolutely deaf. Then he proposed to me in broad daylight this morning, in front of that dreadful statue of Achilles. Really, the things that go on in front of that work of art are quite appalling. The police should interfere. At luncheon I saw by the glare in his eye that he was going to propose again, and I just managed to check him in time by assuring him that I was a bimetallist. Fortunately I don't know what bimetallism means. And I don't believe anybody else does either. But the observation crushed Tommy for ten minutes. He looked quite shocked. And then Tommy is so annoying in the way he proposes. If he proposed at the top of his voice, I should

not mind so much. That might produce some effect on the public. But he does it in a horrid confidential way. When Tommy wants to be romantic he talks to one just like a doctor. I am very fond of Tommy, but his methods of proposing are quite out of date. I wish, Gertrude, you would speak to him, and tell him that once a week is quite often enough to propose to anyone, and that it should always be done in a manner that attracts some attention.

LADY CHILTERN

Dear Mabel, don't talk like that. Besides, Robert thinks very highly of Mr. Trafford. He believes he has a brillant future before him.

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! I wouldn't marry a man with a future before him for anything under the sun.

LADY CHILTERN

Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

I know, dear. You married a man with a future, didn't you? But then Robert was a genius, and you have a noble, self-sacrificing

character. You can stand geniuses. I have no character at all, and Robert is the only genius I could ever bear. As a rule, I think they are quite impossible. Geniuses talk so much, don't they? Such a bad habit! And they are always thinking about themselves, when I want them to be thinking about me. I must go round now and rehearse at Lady Basildon's. You remember, we are having tableaux, don't you? The Triumph of something, I don't know what! I hope it will be triumph of me. Only triumph I am really interested in at present. [*Kisses Lady Chiltern and goes out; then comes running back.*] Oh, Gertrude, do you know who is coming to see you? That dreadful Mrs. Cheveley, in a most lovely gown. Did you ask her?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] Mrs. Cheveley! Coming to see me? Impossible!

MABEL CHILTERN

I assure you she is coming upstairs, as large as life and not nearly so natural.

LADY CHILTERN

You need not wait, Mabel. Remember, Lady Basildon is expecting you.

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! I must shake hands with Lady Markby. She is delightful. I love being scolded by her.

[*Enter Mason.*]

MASON

Lady Markby. Mrs. Cheveley.

[*Enter Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley.*]

LADY CHILTERN

[*Advancing to meet them.*] Dear Lady Markby, how nice of you to come and see me! [*Shakes hands with her, and bows somewhat distantly to Mrs. Cheveley.*] Won't you sit down, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks. Isn't that Miss Chiltern? I should like so much to know her.

LADY CHILTERN

Mabel, Mrs. Cheveley wishes to know you. [*Mabel Chiltern gives a little nod.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Sitting down.*] I thought your frock so charming last night, Miss Chiltern. So simple and . . . suitable.

MABEL CHILTERN

Really? I must tell my dressmaker. It will be such a surprise to her. Good-bye, Lady Markby!

LADY MARKBY

Going already?

MABEL CHILTERN

I am so sorry but I am obliged to. I am just off to rehearsal. I have got to stand on my head in some tableaux.

LADY MARKBY

On your head, child? Oh, I hope not. I believe it is most unhealthy. [*Takes a seat on the sofa next Lady Chiltern.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

But it is for an excellent charity; in aid of the Undeserving, the only people I am really interested in. I am the secretary, and Tommy Trafford is treasurer.

MRS. CHEVELEY

And what is Lord Goring?

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! Lord Goring is president.

MRS. CHEVELEY

The post should suit him admirably, unless he has deteriorated since I knew him first.

LADY MARKBY

[*Reflecting.*] You are remarkably modern, Mabel. A little too modern, perhaps. Nothing is so dangerous as being too modern. One is apt to grow old-fashioned quite suddenly. I have known many instances of it.

MABEL CHILTERN

What a dreadful prospect!

LADY MARKBY

Ah, my dear, you need not be nervous. You will always be as pretty as possible. That is the best fashion there is, and the only fashion that England succeeds in setting.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a curtsey.*] Thank you so much, Lady Markby, for England . . . and myself. [*Goes out.*]

LADY MARKBY

[*Turning to Lady Chiltern.*] Dear Gertrude, we just called to know if Mrs. Cheveley's diamond brooch has been found.

LADY CHILTERN

Here?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. I missed it when I got back to Claridge's, and I thought I might possibly have dropped it here.

LADY CHILTERN

I have heard nothing about it. But I will send for the butler and ask. [*Touches the bell.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, pray don't trouble, Lady Chiltern. I daresay I lost it at the Opera before we came on here.

LADY MARKBY

Ah yes, I suppose it must have been at the Opera. The fact is, we all scramble and jostle so much nowadays that I wonder we have anything at all left on us at the end of an evening. I know myself that, when I am coming back from the Drawing Room, I always feel as if I hadn't a shred on me, except a small shred of decent reputation, just enough to prevent the

lower classes making painful observations though the windows of the carriage. The fact is that our Society is terribly overpopulated. Really, some one should arrange a proper scheme of assisted emigration. It would do a great deal of good.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I quite agree with you, Lady Markby. It is nearly six years since I have been in London for the season, and I must say Society has become dreadfully mixed. One sees the oddest people everywhere.

LADY MARKBY

That is quite true, dear. But one needn't know them. I'm sure I don't know half the people who come to my house. Indeed, from all I hear, I shouldn't like to.

[*Enter Mason.*]

LADY CHILTERN

What sort of a brooch was it that you lost, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

A diamond snake-brooch, with a ruby, a rather large ruby?

LADY MARKBY

I thought you said there was a sapphire on the head, dear?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Smiling.*] No, Lady Markby—a ruby.

LADY MARKBY

[*Nodding her head.*] And very becoming, I am quite sure.

LADY CHILTERN

Has a ruby and diamond brooch been found in any of the rooms this morning, Mason?

MASON

No, my lady.

MRS. CHEVELEY

It really is of no consequence, Lady Chiltern. I am so sorry to have put you to any inconvenience.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Coldly.*] Oh, it has been no inconvenience. That will do, Mason. You can bring tea.

[*Exit Mason.*]

LADY MARKBY

Well, I must say it is most annoying to lose anything. I remember once at Bath, years ago, losing in the Pump Room an exceedingly handsome cameo bracelet that Sir John had given me. I don't think he has ever given me anything since, I am sorry to say. He has sadly degenerated. Really, this horrid House of Commons quite ruins our husbands for us. I think the Lower House by far the greatest blow to a happy married life that there has been since that terrible thing called the Higher Education of Women was invented.

LADY CHILTERN

Ah, it is heresy to say that in this house, Lady Markby. Robert is a great champion of the Higher Education of Women, and so, I am afraid, am I.

MRS. CHEVELEY

The higher education of men is what I should like to see. Men need it so sadly.

LADY MARKBY

They do, dear. But I am afraid such a scheme would be quite unpractical. I don't

think man has much capacity for development. He has got as far as he can, and that is not far, is it? With regard to women, well, dear Gertrude, you belong to the younger generation, and I am sure it is all right if you approve of it. In my time, of course, we were taught not to understand anything. That was the old system, and wonderfully interesting it was. I assure you that the amount of things I and my poor dear sister were taught not to understand was quite extraordinary. But modern women understand everything, I am told.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Except their husbands. That is the one thing the modern woman never understands.

LADY MARKBY

And a very good thing, too, dear, I daresay. It might break up many a happy home if they did. Not yours, I need hardly say, Gertrude. You have married a pattern husband. I wish I could say as much for myself. But since Sir John has taken to attending the debates regularly, which he never used to do in the good old days, his language has become quite impossible. He always seems to think that he is addressing

the House and consequently whenever he discusses the state of the agricultural labourer, or the Welsh Church, or something quite improper of that kind, I am obliged to send all the servants out of the room. It is not pleasant to see one's own butler, who has been with one for twenty-three years, actually blushing at the sideboard, and the footmen making contortions in corners like persons in circuses. I assure you my life will be quite ruined unless they send John at once to the Upper House. He won't take any interest in politics then, will he? The House of Lords is so sensible. An assembly of gentlemen. But in his present state, Sir John is really a great trial. Why, this morning before breakfast was half over, he stood up on the hearthrug, put his hands in his pockets, and appealed to the country at the top of his voice. I left the table as soon as I had my second cup of tea, I need hardly say. But his violent language could be heard all over the house! I trust, Gertrude, that Sir Robert is not like that?

LADY CHILTERN

But I am very much interested in politics, Lady Markby. I love to hear Robert talk about them.

LADY MARKBY

Well, I hope he is not as devoted to Blue Books as Sir John is. I don't think they can be quite improving reading for anyone.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Languidly.*] I have never read a Blue Book. I prefer books . . . in yellow covers.

LADY MARKBY

[*Genially unconscious.*] Yellow is a gayer colour, is it not? I used to wear yellow a good deal in my early days, and would do so now if Sir John was not so painfully personal in his observations, and a man on the question of dress is always ridiculous, is he not?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, no! I think men are the only authorities on dress.

LADY MARKBY

Really? One wouldn't say so from the sort of hats they wear, would one?

[*The butler enters, followed by the footman. Tea is set on a small table close to Lady Chiltern.*]

LADY CHILTERN

May I give you some tea, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks. [*The butler hands Mrs. Cheveley a cup of tea on a salver.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Some tea, Lady Markby?

LADY MARKBY

No thanks dear. [*The servants go out.*] The fact is, I have promised to go round for ten minutes to see poor Lady Brancaster, who is in very great trouble. Her daughter, quite a well-brought-up girl, too, has actually become engaged to be married to a curate in Shropshire. It is very sad, very sad indeed. I can't understand this modern mania for curates. In my time we girls saw them, of course, running about the place like rabbits. But we never took any notice of them, I need hardly say. But I am told that nowadays country society is quite honeycombed with them. I think it most irreligious. And then the eldest son has quarrelled with his father, and it is said that when they meet at the club Lord Brancaster always hides

himself behind the money article in "The Times." However, I believe that is quite a common occurrence nowadays and that they have to take in extra copies of "The Times" at all the clubs in St. James's Street; there are so many sons who won't have anything to do with their fathers, and so many fathers who won't speak to their sons. I think myself, it is very much to be regretted.

MRS. CHEVELEY

So do I. Fathers have so much to learn from their sons nowadays.

LADY MARKBY

Really, dear? What?

MRS. CHEVELEY

The art of living. The only really Fine Art we have produced in modern times.

LADY MARKBY

[*Shaking her head.*] Ah! I am afraid Lord Brancaster knew a good deal about that. More than his poor wife ever did. [*Turning to Lady Chiltern.*] You know Lady Brancaster, don't you, dear?

LADY CHILTERN

Just slightly. She was staying at Langston last autumn, when we were there.

LADY MARKBY

Well, like all stout women, she looks the very picture of happiness, as no doubt you noticed. But there are many tragedies in her family, besides this affair of the curate. Her own sister, Mrs. Jekyll, had a most unhappy life; through no fault of her own, I am sorry to say. She ultimately was so broken-hearted that she went into a convent, or on to the operatic stage, I forget which. No; I think it was decorative art-needlework she took up. I know she had lost all sense of pleasure in life. [*Rising.*] And now, Gertrude, if you will allow me, I shall leave Mrs. Cheveley in your charge and call back for her in a quarter of an hour. Or perhaps, dear Mrs. Cheveley, you wouldn't mind waiting in the carriage while I am with Lady Brancaster. As I intend it to be a visit of condolence, I shan't stay long.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Rising.*] I don't mind waiting in the car-

riage at all, provided there is somebody to look at one.

LADY MARKBY

Well, I hear the curate is always prowling about the house.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I am afraid I am not fond of girl friends.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] Oh, I hope Mrs. Cheveley will stay here a little. I should like to have a few minutes' conversation with her.

MRS. CHEVELEY

How very kind of you, Lady Chiltern! Believe me, nothing would give me greater pleasure.

LADY MARKBY

Ah! no doubt you both have many pleasant reminiscences of your schooldays to talk over together. Good-bye, dear Gertrude! Shall I see you at Lady Bonar's to-night? She has discovered a wonderful new genius. He does . . . nothing at all, I believe. That is a great comfort, is it not?

LADY CHILTERN

Robert and I are dining at home by ourselves to-night, and I don't think I shall go anywhere afterwards. Robert, of course, will have to be in the House. But there is nothing interesting on.

LADY MARKBY

Dining at home by yourselves? Is that quite prudent? Ah, I forgot, your husband is an exception. Mine is the general rule, and nothing ages a woman so rapidly as having married the general rule. [*Exit Lady Markby.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Wonderful woman, Lady Markby, isn't she? Talks more and says less than anybody I ever met. She is made to be a public speaker. Much more so than her husband, though he is a typical Englishman, always dull and usually violent.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Makes no answer, but remains standing. There is a pause. Then the eyes of the two women meet. Lady Chiltern looks stern and pale. Mrs. Cheveley seems rather amused.*] Mrs. Cheveley, I think it is right to tell you quite

frankly that, had I known who you really were, I should not have invited you to my house last night.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With an impertinent smile.*] Really?

LADY CHILTERN

I could not have done so.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I see that after all these years you have not changed a bit, Gertrude.

LADY CHILTERN

I never change.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Elevating her eyebrows.*] Then life has taught you nothing?

LADY CHILTERN

It has taught me that a person who has once been guilty of a dishonest and dishonourable action may be guilty of it a second time, and should be shunned.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Would you apply that rule to everyone?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes, to everyone, without exception.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Then I am sorry for you, Gertrude, very sorry for you.

LADY CHILTERN

You see now, I am sure, that for many reasons any further acquaintance between us during your stay in London is quite impossible?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Leaning back in her chair.*] Do you know, Gertrude, I don't mind your talking morality a bit. Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike. You dislike me. I am quite aware of that. And I have always detested you. And yet I have come here to do you a service.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Contemptuously.*] Like the service you wished to render my husband last night, I suppose. Thank heaven, I saved him from that.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Starting to her feet.*] It was you who made

him write that insolent letter to me? It was you who made him break his promise?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Then you must make him keep it. I give you till to-morrow morning—no more. If by that time your husband does not solemnly bind himself to help me in this great scheme in which I am interested——

LADY CHILTERN

This fraudulent speculation——

MRS. CHEVELEY

Call it what you choose. I hold your husband in the hollow of my hand, and if you are wise you will make him do what I tell him.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Rising and going towards her.*] You are impertinent. What has my husband to do with you? With a woman like you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a bitter laugh.*] In this world like

meets with like. It is because your husband is himself fraudulent and dishonest that we pair so well together. Between you and him there are chasms. He and I are closer than friends. We are enemies linked together. The same sin binds us.

LADY CHILTERN

How dare you class my husband with yourself? How dare you threaten him or me? Leave my house. You are unfit to enter it.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern enters from behind. He hears his wife's last words, and sees to whom they are addressed. He grows deadly pale.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Your house! A house bought with the price of dishonour. A house, everything in which has been paid for by fraud. [*Turns round and sees Sir Robert Chiltern.*] Ask him what the origin of his fortune is! Get him to tell you how he sold to a stockbroker a Cabinet secret. Learn from him to what you owe your position.

LADY CHILTERN

It is not true! Robert! It is not true!

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Pointing at him with outstretched finger.*] Look at him! Can he deny it? Does he dare to?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Go! Go at once. You have done your worst now.

MRS. CHEVELEY

My worst? I have not yet finished with you, with either of you. I give you both till to-morrow at noon. If by then you don't do what I bid you to do, the whole world shall know the origin of Robert Chiltern.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern strikes the bell. Enter Mason.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Show Mrs. Cheveley out.

[*Mrs. Cheveley starts; then bows with somewhat exaggerated politeness to Lady Chiltern, who makes no sign of response. As she passes by Sir Robert Chiltern, who is standing close to the door, she pauses for a moment and looks him straight in the face. She then goes out, followed by the servant, who closes the door after*

him. The husband and wife are left alone. Lady Chiltern stands like some one in a dreadful dream. Then she turns round and looks at her husband. She looks at him with strange eyes, as though she were seeing him for the first time.]

LADY CHILTERN

You sold a Cabinet secret for money! You began your life with fraud! You built up your career on dishonour! Oh, tell me it is not true! Lie to me! Lie to me! Tell me it is not true!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What this woman said is quite true. But, Gertrude, listen to me. You don't realize how I was tempted. Let me tell you the whole thing. [*Goes towards her.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Don't come near me. Don't touch me. I feel as if you had soiled me forever. Oh! what a mask you have been wearing all these years! A horrible painted mask! You sold yourself for money. Oh! a common thief were better! You put yourself up to sale to the highest bidder! You were bought in the market. You

lied to the whole world. And yet you will not lie to me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rushing towards her.*] Gertrude! Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

[*Thrusting him back with outstretched hands.*] No, don't speak! Say nothing! Your voice wakes terrible memories—memories of things that made me love you—memories of words that made me love you—memories that now are horrible to me. And how I worshipped you! You were to me something apart from common life, a thing pure, noble, honest, without stain. The world seemed to me finer because you were in it, and goodness more real because you lived. And now—oh, when I think that I made of a man like you my ideal! the ideal of my life!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

There was your mistake. There was your error. The error all women commit. Why can't you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? We have all feet of clay, women as well as men:

but when we men love women, we love them knowing their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. It is when we are wounded by our own hands, or by the hands of others, that love should come to cure us—else what use is love at all? All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon. A man's love is like that. It is wider, larger, more human than a woman's. Women think that they are making ideals of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely. You made your false idol of me, and I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my weaknesses. I was afraid that I might lose your love, as I have lost it now. And so, last night you ruined my life for me—yes, ruined it! What this woman asked of me was nothing compared to what she offered to me. She offered security, peace, stability. The sin of my youth, that I had thought was buried, rose up in front of me, hideous, horrible, with its hands at my throat. I could have killed it for ever, sent it back into its tomb,

destroyed its record, burned the one witness against me. You prevented me. No one but you, you know it. And now what is there before me but public disgrace, ruin, terrible shame, the mockery of the world, a lonely dishonoured life, a lonely dishonoured death, it may be, some day? Let women make no more ideals of men! let them not put them on altars and bow before them, or they may ruin other lives as completely as you—you whom I have so wildly loved—have ruined mine!

[*He passes from the room. Lady Chiltern rushes towards him, but the door is closed when she reaches it. Pale with anguish, bewildered, helpless, she sways like a plant in the water. Her hands, outstretched, seem to tremble in the air like blossoms in the wind. Then she flings herself down beside a sofa and buries her face. Her sobs are like the sobs of a child.*]

ACT-DROP.

THIRD ACT.

SCENE—*The Library in Lord Goring's house. An Adam room. On the right is the door leading into the hall. On the left, the door of the smoking-room. A pair of folding doors at the back open into the drawing-room. The fire is lit. Phipps, the butler, is arranging some newspapers on the writing-table. The distinction of Phipps is his impassivity. He has been termed by enthusiasts the Ideal Butler. The Sphinx is not so incommunicable. He is a mask with a manner. Of his intellectual or emotional life history knows nothing. He represents the dominance of form.*

[*Enter Lord Goring in evening dress with a buttonhole. He is wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape. White-gloved, he carries a Louis Seize cane. His are all the delicate fopperies of*

Fashion. One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it. He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought.]

LORD GORING

Got my second buttonhole for me, Phipps?

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord. [*Takes his hat, cane and cape, and presents new buttonhole on salver.*]

LORD GORING

Rather distinguished thing, Phipps. I am the only person of the smallest importance in London at present who wears a buttonhole.

PHIPPS

Yes, my Lord, I have observed that.

LORD GORING

[*Taking out old buttonhole.*] You see, Phipps, Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Just as vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

[*Putting in new buttonhole.*] And falsehoods the truths of other people.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance, Phipps.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

[*Looking at himself in the glass.*] Don't think I quite like this buttonhole, Phipps. Makes me look a little too old. Makes me almost in the prime of life, eh, Phipps?

PHIPPS

I don't observe any alteration in your lordship's appearance.

LORD GORING

You don't, Phipps?

PHIPPS

No, my lord.

LORD GORING

I am not quite sure. For the future a more trivial buttonhole, Phipps, on Thursday evenings.

PHIPPS

I will speak to the florist, my lord. She has had a loss in her family lately, which perhaps accounts for the lack of triviality your lordship complains of in the buttonhole.

LORD GORING

Extraordinary thing about the lower classes in England—they are always losing their relations.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord! They are extremely fortunate in that respect.

LORD GORING

[*Turns round and looks at him. Phipps remains impassive.*] Hum! Any letters, Phipps?

PHIPPS

Three, my lord. [*Hands letters on a salver.*]

LORD GORING

[*Takes letters.*] Want my cab round in twenty minutes.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord. [*Goes towards door.*]

LORD GORING

[*Holds up letter in pink envelope.*] Ahem! Phipps, when did this letter arrive?

PHIPPS

It was brought by hand just after your lordship went to the Club.

LORD GORING

That will do. [*Exit Phipps.*] Lady Chiltern's handwriting on Lady Chiltern's pink notepaper. That is rather curious. I thought Robert was to write. Wonder what Lady Chiltern has got to say to me? [*Sits at bureau and opens letter, and reads it.*] "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude." [*Puts down the letter with a puzzled look. Then takes it up, and reads it again slowly.*] "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you." So she has found out everything! Poor woman! Poor woman! [*Pulls out watch and looks at it.*] But what an hour to call! Ten o'clock! I shall have to give up going to the Berkshires. However, it is always nice to be expected, and not to arrive. I am not expected at the Bachelors', so I shall certainly go there. Well, I will make her stand by her husband. That is the only thing for her to do. That is the only thing for any woman to do. It is the growth of the moral sense in women that makes marriage such a hopeless, one-sided institution. Ten o'clock. She should be here soon. I must tell Phipps I am not in to anyone else. [*Goes towards bell.*]

[*Enter Phipps.*]

PHIPPS

Lord Caversham.

LORD GORING

Oh, why will parents always appear at the wrong time? Some extraordinary mistake in nature, I suppose. [*Enter Lord Caversham.*] Delighted to see you, my dear father. [*Goes to meet him.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Take my cloak off.

LORD GORING

Is it worth while, father?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Of course it is worth while, sir. Which is the most comfortable chair?

LORD GORING

This one, father. It is the chair I use myself, when I have visitors.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Thank ye. No draught, I hope, in this room?

LORD GORING

No, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Sitting down.*] Glad to hear it. Can't stand draughts. No draughts at home.

LORD GORING

Good many breezes, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Eh? Eh? Don't understand what you mean. Want to have a serious conversation with you, sir.

LORD GORING

My dear father! At this hour?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir, it is only ten o'clock. What is your objection to the hour? I think the hour is an admirable hour!

LORD GORING

Well, the fact is, father, this is not my day for talking seriously. I am very sorry, but it is not my day.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What do you mean, sir?

LORD GORING

During the season, father, I only talk seriously on the first Tuesday in every month, from four to seven.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, make it Tuesday, sir, make it Tuesday.

LORD GORING

But it is after seven, father, and my doctor says I must not have any serious conversation after seven. It makes me talk in my sleep.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Talk in your sleep, sir? What does that matter? You are not married.

LORD GORING

No, father, I am not married.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Hum! That is what I have come to talk to you about, sir. You have got to get married, and at once. Why, when I was your age, sir, I had been an inconsolable widower for three

months, and was already paying my addresses to your admirable mother. Damme, sir, it is your duty to get married. You can't be always living for pleasure. Every man of position is married nowadays. Bachelors are not fashionable any more. They are a damaged lot. Too much is known about them. You must get a wife, sir. Look where your friend Robert Chiltern has got to by probity, hard work, and a sensible marriage with a good woman. Why don't you imitate him, sir? Why don't you take him for your model?

LORD GORING

I think I shall, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I wish you would, sir. Then I should be happy. At present I make your mother's life miserable on your account. You are heartless, sir, quite heartless.

LORD GORING

I hope not, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

And it is high time for you to get married. You are thirty-four years of age, sir.

LORD GORING

Yes, father, but I only admit to thirty-two—thirty-one and a half when I have a really good buttonhole. This buttonhole is not . . . trivial enough.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I tell you you are thirty-four, sir. And there is a draught in your room, besides, which makes your conduct worse. Why did you tell me there was no draught, sir? I feel a draught, sir, I feel it distinctly.

LORD GORING

So do I, father. It is a dreadful draught. I will come and see you to-morrow, father. We can talk over anything you like. Let me help you on with your cloak, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

No, sir; I have called this evening for a definite purpose, and I am going to see it through at all costs to my health or yours. Put down my cloak, sir.

LORD GORING

Certainly, father. But let us go into an-

other room. [*Rings bell.*] There is a dreadful draught here. [*Enter Phipps.*] Phipps, is there a good fire in the smoking-room?

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Come in there, father. Your sneezes are quite heart-rending.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir, I suppose I have a right to sneeze when I choose?

LORD GORING

[*Apologetically.*] Quite so, father. I was merely expressing sympathy.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Oh, damn sympathy. There is a great deal too much of that sort of thing going on nowadays.

LORD GORING

I quite agree with you, father. If there was less sympathy in the world there would be less trouble in the world.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Going towards the smoking-room.*] That is a paradox, sir. I hate paradoxes.

LORD GORING

So do I, father. Everybody one meets is a paradox nowadays. It is a great bore. It makes society so obvious.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Turning round and looking at his son beneath his bushy eyebrows.*] Do you always really understand what you say, sir?

LORD GORING

[*After some hesitation.*] Yes, father, if I listen attentively.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Indignantly.*] If you listen attentively! . . . Conceited young puppy!

[*Goes off grumbling into the smoking-room. Phipps enters.*]

LORD GORING

Phipps, there is a lady coming to see me this evening on particular business. Show her into

the drawing-room when she arrives. You understand?

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

It is a matter of the gravest importance, Phipps.

PHIPPS

I understand, my lord.

LORD GORING

No one else is to be admitted, under any circumstances.

PHIPPS

I understand, my lord. [*Bell rings.*]

LORD GORING

Ah, that is probably the lady. I shall see her myself.

[*Just as he is going towards the door Lord Caversham enters from the smoking-room.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir? am I to wait attendance on you?

LORD GORING

[*Considerably perplexed.*] In a moment, father. Do excuse me. [*Lord Caversham goes back.*] Well, remember my instructions, Phipps —into that room.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

[*Lord Goring goes into the smoking-room. Harold, the footman, shows Mrs. Cheveley in. Lamia-like, she is in green and silver. She has a cloak of black satin, lined with dead rose-leaf silk.*]

HAROLD

What name, madam?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*To Phipps, who advances towards her.*] Is Lord Goring not here? I was told he was at home.

PHIPPS

His lordship is engaged at present with Lord Caversham, madam.

[*Turns a cold, glassy eye on Harold, who at once retires.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*To herself.*] How very filial!

PHIPPS

His lordship told me to ask you, madam, to be kind enough to wait in the drawing-room for him. His lordship will come to you there.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a look of surprise.*] Lord Goring expects me?

PHIPPS

Yes, madam.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Are you quite sure?

PHIPPS

His lordship told me that if a lady called I was to ask her to wait in the drawing-room. [*Goes to the door of the drawing-room and opens it.*] His lordship's directions on the subject were very precise.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*To herself.*] How thoughtful of him! To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly mod-

ern intellect. [*Goes towards the drawing-room and looks in.*] Ugh! How dreary a bachelor's drawing-room always looks. I shall have to alter all this. [*Phipps brings the lamp from the writing-table.*] No, I don't care for that lamp. It is far too glaring. Light some candles.

PHIPPS

[*Replaces lamp.*] Certainly, madam.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I hope the candles have very becoming shades.

PHIPPS

We have had no complaints about them, madam, as yet.

[*Passes into the drawing-room and begins to light the candles.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*To herself.*] I wonder what woman he is waiting for to-night. It will be delightful to catch him. Men always look so silly when they are caught. And they are always being caught. [*Looks about room and approaches the writing-table.*] What a very interesting room! What a very interesting picture! Wonder what his

correspondence is like. [*Takes up letters.*] Oh, what a very uninteresting correspondence! Bills and cards, debts and dowagers! Who on earth writes to him on pink paper! How silly to write on pink paper! It looks like the beginning of a middle-class romance. Romance should never begin with sentiment. It should begin with science and end with a settlement. [*Puts letter down, then takes it up again.*] I know that handwriting. That is Gertrude Chiltern's. I remember it perfectly. The ten commandments in every stroke of the pen, and the moral law all over the page. Wonder what Gertrude is writing to him about? Something horrid about me, I suppose. How I detest that woman! [*Reads it.*] "I trust you. I want you. I am coming to you. Gertrude." "I trust you. I want you. I am coming to you."

[*A look of triumph comes over her face. She is just about to steal the letter, when Phipps comes in.*]

PHIPPS

The candles in the drawing-room are lit, madam, as you directed.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thank you. [*Rises hastily, and slips the letter under a large silver-cased blotting-book that is lying on the table.*]

PHIPPS

I trust the shades will be to your liking, madam. They are the most becoming we have. They are the same as his lordship uses himself when he is dressing for dinner.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a smile.*] Then I am sure they will be perfectly right.

PHIPPS

[*Gravely.*] Thank you, madam.

[*Mrs. Cheveley goes into the drawing-room. Phipps closes the door and retires. The door is then slowly opened, and Mrs. Cheveley comes out and creeps stealthily towards the writing-table. Suddenly voices are heard from the smoking-room. Mrs. Cheveley grows pale and stops. The voices grow louder, and she goes back into the drawing-room, biting her lip.*]

[*Enter Lord Goring and Lord Caversham.*]

LORD GORING

[*Expostulating.*] My dear father, if I am to get married, surely you will allow me to choose the time, place and person? Particularly the person.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Testily.*] That is a matter for me, sir. You would probably make a very poor choice. It is I who should be consulted, not you. There is property at stake. It is not a matter for affection. Affection comes later on in married life.

LORD GORING

Yes. In married life affection comes when people thoroughly dislike each other, father, doesn't it? [*Puts on Lord Caversham's cloak for him.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Certainly, sir. I mean certainly not, sir. You are talking very foolishly to-night. What I say is that marriage is a matter for common sense.

LORD GORING

But women who have common sense are so

curiously plain, father, aren't they? Of course I only speak from hearsay.

LORD CAVERSHAM

No woman, plain or pretty, has any common sense at all, sir. Common sense is the privilege of our own sex.

LORD GORING

Quite so. And we men are so self-sacrificing that we never use it, do we, father?

LORD CAVERSHAM

I use it, sir. I use nothing else.

LORD GORING

So my mother tells me.

LORD CAVERSHAM

It is the secret of your mother's happiness. You are very heartless, sir, very heartless.

LORD GORING

I hope not, father.

[*Goes out for a moment. Then returns, looking rather put out, with Sir Robert Chiltern.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My dear Arthur, what a piece of good luck

meeting you on the doorstep! Your servant had just told me you were not at home. How extraordinary!

LORD GORING

The fact is, I am horribly busy to-night, Robert, and I gave orders I was not at home to anyone. Even my father had a comparatively cold reception. He complained of a draught the whole time.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Ah! you must be at home to me, Arthur. You are my best friend. Perhaps by to-morrow you will be my only friend. My wife has discovered everything.

LORD GORING

Ah! I guessed as much!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Looking at him.*] Really! How?

LORD GORING

[*After some hesitation.*] Oh, merely by something in the expression of your face as you came in. Who told her?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Mrs. Cheveley herself. And the woman I love knows that I began my career with an act of low dishonesty, that I built up my life upon sands of shame—that I sold, like a common huckster, the secret that had been intrusted to me as a man of honour. I thank heaven poor Lord Radley died without knowing that I betrayed him. I would to God I had died before I had been so horribly tempted, or had fallen so low. [*Burying his face in his hands.*]

LORD GORING

[*After a pause.*] You have heard nothing from Vienna yet, in answer to your wire?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Looking up.*] Yes; I got a telegram from the first secretary at eight o'clock to-night.

LORD GORING

Well?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Nothing is absolutely known against her. On the contrary, she occupies a rather high position in society. It is a sort of open secret that

Baron Arnheim left her the greater portion of his immense fortune. Beyond that I can learn nothing.

LORD GORING

She doesn't turn out to be a spy, then?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh! spies are of no use nowadays. Their profession is over. The newspapers do their work instead.

LORD GORING

And thunderingly well they do it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur, I am parched with thirst. May I ring for something? Some hock and seltzer?

LORD GORING

Certainly. Let me. [*Rings the bell.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Thanks! I don't know what to do, Arthur, I don't know what to do, and you are my only friend. But what a friend you are—the one friend I can trust. I can trust you absolutely, can't I?

[*Enter Phipps.*]

LORD GORING

My dear Robert, of course. Oh! [*To Phipps.*] Bring some hock and seltzer.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

And Phipps!

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Will you excuse me for a moment, Robert? I want to give some directions to my servant.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Certainly.

LORD GORING

When that lady calls, tell her that I am not expected home this evening. Tell her that I have been suddenly called out of town. You understand?

PHIPPS

The lady is in that room, my lord. You told me to show her into that room, my lord.

LORD GORING

You did perfectly right. [*Exit Phipps.*] What a mess I am in. No; I think I shall get through it. I'll give her a lecture through the door. Awkward thing to manage, though.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur, tell me what I should do. My life seems to have crumbled about me. I am a ship without a rudder in a night without a star.

LORD GORING

Robert, you love your wife, don't you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I love her more than anything in the world. I used to think ambition the great thing. It is not. Love is the great thing in the world. There is nothing but love, and I love her. But I am defamed in her eyes. I am ignoble in her eyes. There is a wide gulf between us now. She has found me out, Arthur, she has found me out.

LORD GORING

Has she never in her life done some folly—some indiscretion—that she should not forgive your sin?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My wife! Never! She does not know what weakness or temptation is. I am of clay like other men. She stands apart as good women do—pitiless in her perfection—cold and stern and without mercy. But I love her, Arthur. We are childless, and I have no one else to love, no one else to love me. Perhaps if God had sent us children she might have been kinder to me. But God has given us a lonely house. And she has cut my heart in two. Don't let us talk of it. I was brutal to her this evening. But I suppose when sinners talk to saints they are brutal always. I said to her things that were hideously true, on my side, from my standpoint, from the standpoint of men. But don't let us talk of that.

LORD GORING

Your wife will forgive you. Perhaps at this moment she is forgiving you. She loves you, Robert. Why should she not forgive?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

God grant it! God grant it! [*Buries his face in his hands.*] But there is something more I have to tell you, Arthur.

[*Enter Phipps with drinks.*]

PHIPPS

[*Hands hock and seltzer to Sir Robert Chiltern.*] Hock and seltzer, sir.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Thank you.

LORD GORING

Is your carriage here, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

No; I walked from the club.

LORD GORING

Sir Robert will take my cab, Phipps.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Robert, you don't mind my sending you away?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur, you must let me stay for five minutes. I have made up my mind what I am going to do to-night in the House. The debate on the Ar-

gentine Canal is to begin at eleven. [*A chair falls in the drawing-room.*] What is that?

LORD GORING

Nothing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I heard a chair fall in the next room. Some one has been listening.

LORD GORING

No, no; there is no one there.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

There is some one. There are lights in the room, and the door is ajar. Some one has been listening to every secret of my life. Arthur, what does this mean?

LORD GORING

Robert, you are excited, unnerved. I tell you there is no one in that room. Sit down, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Do you give me your word that there is no one there?

LORD GORING

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Your word of honour? [*Sits down.*]

LORD GORING

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rises.*] Arthur, let me see for myself.

LORD GORING

No, no.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

If there is no one there why should I not look in that room? Arthur, you must let me go into that room and satisfy myself. Let me know that no eavesdropper has heard my life's secret. Arthur, you don't realize what I am going through.

LORD GORING

Robert, this must stop. I have told you that there is no one in that room—that is enough.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rushes to the door of the room.*] It is not enough. I insist on going into this room. You

have told me there is no one there, so what reason can you have for refusing me?

LORD GORING

For God's sake, don't! There is some one there. Some one whom you must not see.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Ah, I thought so!

LORD GORING

I forbid you to enter that room.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Stand back. My life is at stake. And I don't care who is there. I will know who it is to whom I have told my secret and my shame. [*Enters room.*]

LORD GORING

Great Heavens! his own wife!

[*Sir Robert Chiltern comes back, with a look of scorn and anger on his face.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What explanation have you to give me for the presence of that woman here?

LORD GORING

Robert, I swear to you on my honour that that lady is stainless and guiltless of all offence towards you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

She is a vile, an infamous thing!

LORD GORING

Don't say that, Robert! It was for your sake she came here. It was to try and save you she came here. She loves you and no one else.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You are mad. What have I to do with her intrigues with you? Let her remain your mistress! You are well suited to each other. She, corrupt and shameful—you, false as a friend, treacherous as an enemy even——

LORD GORING

It is not true, Robert. Before heaven, it is not true. In her presence and in yours I will explain all.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Let me pass, sir. You have lied enough upon your word of honour.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern goes out. Lord Goring rushes to the door of the drawing-room, when Mrs. Cheveley comes out, looking radiant and much amused.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a mock curtsey.*] Good evening, Lord Goring!

LORD GORING

Mrs. Cheveley! Great Heavens! . . . May I ask what you were doing in my drawing-room?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Merely listening. I have a perfect passion for listening through keyholes. One always hears such wonderful things through them.

LORD GORING

Doesn't that sound rather like tempting Providence?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, surely Providence can resist temptation by this time. [*Makes a sign to him to take her cloak off, which he does.*]

LORD GORING

I am glad you have called. I am going to give you some good advice.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh! pray don't. One should never give a woman anything that she can't wear in the evening.

LORD GORING

I see you are quite as wilful as you used to be.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Far more! I have greatly improved. I have had more experience.

LORD GORING

Too much experience is a dangerous thing. Pray have a cigarette. Half the pretty women in London smoke cigarettes. Personally I prefer the other half.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks. I never smoke. My dressmaker wouldn't like it, and a woman's first duty in life is to her dressmaker, isn't it? What the second duty is, no one has as yet discovered.

LORD GORING

You have come here to sell me Robert Chiltern's letter, haven't you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

To offer it to you on conditions. How did you guess that?

LORD GORING

Because you haven't mentioned the subject. Have you got it with you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Sitting down.*] Oh, no! A well-made dress has no pockets.

LORD GORING

What is your price for it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

How absurdly English you are! The English think that a cheque-book can solve every problem in life. Why, my dear Arthur, I have very much more money than you have, and quite as much as Robert Chiltern has got hold of. Money is not what I want.

LORD GORING

What do you want then, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Why don't you call me Laura?

LORD GORING

I don't like the name.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You used to adore it.

LORD GORING

Yes: that's why. [*Mrs. Cheveley motions to him to sit down beside her. He smiles, and does so.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Arthur, you loved me once.

LORD GORING

Yes.

MRS. CHEVELEY

And you asked me to be your wife.

LORD GORING

That was the natural result of my loving you.

MRS. CHEVELEY

And you threw me over because you saw, or said you saw, poor old Lord Mortlake trying to have a violent flirtation with me in the conservatory at Tenby.

LORD GORING

I am under the impression that my lawyer settled that matter with you on certains terms . . . dictated by yourself.

MRS. CHEVELEY

At that time I was poor; you were rich.

LORD GORING

Quite so. That is why you pretended to love me.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] Poor old Lord Mortlake, who had only two topics of conversation, his gout and his wife! I never could quite make out which of the two he was talking about. He used the most horrible language about them both. Well, you were silly, Arthur. Why, Lord Mortlake was never anything more to me than an amusement. One of those utterly tedi-

ous amusements one only finds at an English country house on an English country Sunday. I don't think anyone at all morally responsible for what he or she does at an English country house.

LORD GORING

Yes. I know lots of people think that.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I loved you, Arthur.

LORD GORING

My dear Mrs. Cheveley, you have always been far too clever to know anything about love.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I did love you. And you loved me. You know you loved me, and love is a very wonderful thing. I suppose that when a man has once loved a woman, he will do anything for her, except continue to love her? [*Puts her hand on his.*]

LORD GORING

[*Taking his hand away quietly.*] Yes; except that.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*After a pause.*] I am tired of living abroad. I want to come back to London. I want to have a charming house here. I want to have a salon. If one could only teach the English how to talk, and the Irish how to listen, society here would be quite civilized. Besides, I have arrived at the romantic stage. When I saw you last night at the Chilterns', I knew you were the only person I had ever cared for, if I ever have cared for anybody, Arthur. And so, on the morning of the day you marry me, I will give you Robert Chiltern's letter. That is my offer. I will give it to you now, if you promise to marry me.

LORD GORING

Now?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Smiling.*] To-morrow.

LORD GORING

Are you really serious?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes, quite serious.

LORD GORING

I should make you a very bad husband.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I don't mind bad husbands. I have had two. They amused me immensely.

LORD GORING

You mean that you amused yourself immensely, don't you?

MRS CHEVELEY

What do you know about my married life?

LORD GORING

Nothing: but I can read it like a book.

MRS. CHEVELEY

What book?

LORD GORING

[*Rising.*] The Book of Numbers.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Do you think it quite charming of you to be so rude to a woman in your own house?

LORD GORING

In the case of very fascinating women, sex is a challenge, not a defense.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I suppose that is meant for a compliment. My dear Arthur, women are never disarmed by compliments. Men always are. That is the difference between the two sexes.

LORD GORING

Women are never disarmed by anything, as far as I know them.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*After a pause.*] Then you are going to allow your greatest friend, Robert Chiltern, to be ruined, rather than marry some one who really has considerable attractions left. I thought you would have risen to some great height of self-sacrifice, Arthur, I think you should. And the rest of your life you could spend in contemplating your own perfections.

LORD GORING

Oh! I do that as it is. And self-sacrifice is a thing that should be put down by law. It

is so demoralizing to the people for whom one sacrifices oneself. They always go to the bad.

MRS. CHEVELEY

As if anything could demoralize Robert Chiltern! You seem to forget that I know his real character.

LORD GORING

What you know about him is not his real character. It was an act of folly done in his youth, dishonourable, I admit, shameful, I admit, unworthy of him, I admit, and therefore . . . not his true character.

MRS. CHEVELEY

How you men stand up for each other!

LORD GORING

How you women war against each other!

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Bitterly.*] I only war against one woman, against Gertrude Chiltern. I hate her. I hate her now more than ever.

LORD GORING

Because you have brought a real tragedy into her life, I suppose.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a sneer.*] Oh, there is only one real tragedy in a woman's life. The fact that her past is always her lover, and her future invariably her husband.

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern knows nothing of the kind of life to which you are alluding.

MRS. CHEVELEY

A woman whose size in gloves is seven and three-quarters never knows much about anything. You know Gertrude has always worn seven and three-quarters? That is one of the reasons why there was never any moral sympathy between us . . . Well, Arthur, I suppose this romantic interview may be regarded as at an end. You admit it was romantic, don't you? For the privilege of being your wife I was ready to surrender a great prize, the climax of my diplomatic career. You declined. Very well. If Sir Robert doesn't uphold my Argentine scheme, I expose him. *Voilà tout.*

LORD GORING

You mustn't do that. It would be vile, horrible, infamous.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] Oh! don't use big words. They mean so little. It is a commercial transaction. That is all. There is no good mixing up sentimentality in it. I offered to sell Robert Chiltern a certain thing. If he won't pay me my price, he will have to pay the world a greater price. There is no more to be said. I must go. Good-bye. Won't you shake hands?

LORD GORING

With you? No. Your transaction with Robert Chiltern may pass as a loathsome commercial transaction of a loathsome commercial age; but you seem to have forgotten that you who came here to-night to talk of love, you whose lips desecrated the word love, you to whom the thing is a book closely sealed, went this afternoon to the house of one of the most noble and gentle women in the world to degrade her husband in her eyes, to try and kill her love for him, to put poison in her heart, and bitter-

ness in her life, to break her idol and, it may be, spoil her soul. That I cannot forgive you. That was horrible. For that there can be no forgiveness.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Arthur, you are unjust to me. Believe me, you are quite unjust to me. I didn't go to taunt Gertrude at all. I had no idea of doing anything of the kind when I entered. I called with Lady Markby simply to ask whether an ornament, a jewel, that I lost somewhere last night, had been found at the Chilterns'. If you don't believe me, you can ask Lady Markby. She will tell you it is true. The scene that occurred happened after Lady Markby had left, and was really forced on me by Gertrude's rudeness and sneers. I called, oh!—a little out of malice if you like—but really to ask if a diamond brooch of mine had been found. That was the origin of the whole thing.

LORD GORING

A diamond snake-brooch with a ruby?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. How do you know?

LORD GORING

Because it is found. In point of fact, I found it myself, and stupidly forgot to tell the butler anything about it as I was leaving. [*Goes over to the writing-table and pulls out the drawers.*] It is in this drawer. No, that one. This is the brooch, isn't it? [*Holds up the brooch.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. I am so glad to get it back. It was . . . a present.

LORD GORING

Won't you wear it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Certainly, if you pin it in. [*Lord Goring suddenly clasps it on her arm.*] Why do you put it on as a bracelet? I never knew it could be worn as a bracelet.

LORD GORING

Really?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Holding out her handsome arm.*] No; but it looks very well on me as a bracelet, doesn't it?

LORD GORING

Yes; much better than when I saw it last.

MRS. CHEVELEY

When did you see it last?

LORD GORING

[*Calmly.*] Oh, ten years ago, on Lady Berkshire, from whom you stole it.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Starting.*] What do you mean?

LORD GORING

I mean that you stole that ornament from my cousin, Mary Berkshire, to whom I gave it when she was married. Suspicion fell on a wretched servant, who was sent away in disgrace. I recognized it last night. I determined to say nothing about it till I had found the thief. I have found the thief now, and I have heard her own confession.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Tossing her head.*] It is not true.

LORD GORING

You know it is true. Why, thief is written across your face at this moment.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I will deny the whole affair from beginning to end. I will say that I have never seen this wretched thing, that it was never in my possession.

[*Mrs. Cheveley tries to get the bracelet off her arm, but fails. Lord Goring looks on amused. Her thin fingers tear at the jewel to no purpose. A curse breaks from her.*]

LORD GORING

The drawback of stealing a thing, Mrs. Cheveley, is that one never knows how wonderful the thing that one steals is. You can't get that bracelet off, unless you know where the spring is. And I see you don't know where the spring is. It is rather difficult to find.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You brute! You coward! [*She tries again to unclasp the bracelet, but fails.*]

LORD GORING

Oh! don't use big words. They mean so little.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Again tears at the bracelet in a paroxysm of*

rage, with inarticulate sounds. Then stops, and looks at Lord Goring.] What are you going to do?

LORD GORING

I am going to ring for my servant. He is an admirable servant. Always comes in the moment one rings for him. When he comes I will tell him to fetch the police.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Trembling.*] The police? What for?

LORD GORING

To-morrow the Berkshires will prosecute you. That is what the police are for.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Is now in an agony of physical terror. . . . Her face is distorted. Her mouth awry. A mask has fallen from her. She is, for the moment, dreadful to look at.*] Don't do that. I will do anything you want. Anything in the world you want.

LORD GORING

Give me Robert Chiltern's letter.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Stop! Stop! Let me have time to think.

LORD GORING

Give me Robert Chiltern's letter.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I have not got it with me. I will give it to you to-morrow.

LORD GORING

You know you are lying. Give it to me at once. [*Mrs. Cheveley pulls the letter out, and hands it to him. She is horribly pale.*] This is it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*In a hoarse voice.*] Yes.

LORD GORING

[*Takes the letter, examines it, sighs, and burns it over the lamp.*] For so well-dressed a woman, Mrs. Cheveley, you have moments of admirable common sense. I congratulate you.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Catches sight of Lady Chiltern's letter, the cover of which is just showing from under the blotting-book.*] Please get me a glass of water.

LORD GORING

Certainly. [*Goes to the corner of the room and pours out a glass of water. While his back is turned Mrs. Cheveley steals Lady Chiltern's letter. When Lord Goring returns with the glass she refuses it with a gesture.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thank you. Will you help me on with my cloak?

LORD GORING

With pleasure. [*Puts her cloak on.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks. I am never going to try to harm Robert Chiltern again.

LORD GORING

Fortunately you have not the chance, Mrs. Cheveley.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Well, if even I had the chance, I wouldn't. On the contrary, I am going to render him a great service.

LORD GORING

I am charmed to hear it. It is a reformation.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. I can't bear so upright a gentleman, so honourable an English gentleman, being so shamefully deceived, and so——

LORD GORING

Well?

MRS. CHEVELEY

I find that somehow Gertrude Chiltern's dying speech and confession has strayed into my pocket.

LORD GORING

What do you mean?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a bitter note of triumph in her voice.*] I mean that I am going to send Robert Chiltern the love letter his wife wrote to you to-night.

LORD GORING

Love letter?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Laughing.*] "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude."

[*Lord Goring rushes to the bureau and takes the envelope, finds it empty, and turns round.*]

LORD GORING

You wretched woman, must you always be thieving? Give me back that letter. I'll take it from you by force. You shall not leave my room till I have got it.

[*He rushes towards her, but Mrs. Cheveley at once puts her hand on the electric bell that is on the table. The bell sounds with shrill reverberations, and Phipps enters.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*After a pause.*] Lord Goring merely rang that you should show me out. Good-night, Lord Goring!

[*Goes out, followed by Phipps. Her face is illumined with evil triumph. There is joy in her eyes. Youth seems to have come back to her. Her last glance is like a swift arrow. Lord Goring bites his lip, and lights a cigarette.*]

ACT-DROP.

FOURTH ACT.

SCENE—*Same as Act II.*

[*Lord Goring is standing by the fireplace with his hands in his pockets. He is looking rather bored.*]

LORD GORING

[*Pulls out his watch, inspects it, and rings the bell.*] It is a great nuisance. I can't find anyone in this house to talk to. And I am full of interesting information. I feel like the latest edition of something or other.

[*Enter servant.*]

JAMES

Sir Robert is still at the Foreign Office, my lord.

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern not down yet?

JAMES

Her ladyship has not yet left her room. Miss Chiltern has just come in from riding.

LORD GORING

[*To himself.*] Ah! that is something.

JAMES

Lord Caversham has been waiting some time in the library for Sir Robert. I told him your lordship was here.

LORD GORING

Thank you. Would you kindly tell him I've gone?

JAMES

[*Bowing.*] I shall do so, my lord.

[*Exit Servant.*]

LORD GORING

Really, I don't want to meet my father three days running. It is a great deal too much excitement for any son. I hope to goodness he won't come up. Fathers should be neither seen

nor heard. That is the only proper basis for family life. Mothers are different. Mothers are darlings. [*Throws himself down into a chair, picks up a paper and begins to read it.*]

[*Enter Lord Caversham.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir, what are you doing here? Wasting your time as usual, I suppose?

LORD GORING

[*Throws down paper and rises.*] My dear father, when one pays a visit it is for the purpose of wasting other people's time, not one's own.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Have you been thinking over what I spoke to you about last night?

LORD GORING

I have been thinking about nothing else.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Engaged to be married yet?

LORD GORING

[*Genially.*] Not yet: but I hope to be before lunch-time.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Caustically.*] You can have till dinner-time if it would be of any convenience to you.

LORD GORING

Thanks awfully, but I think I'd sooner be engaged before lunch.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Humph! Never know when you are serious or not.

LORD GORING

Neither do I, father.

[*A pause.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

I suppose you have read "The Times" this morning?

LORD GORING

[*Airily.*] "The Times"? Certainly not. I only read "The Morning Post." All that one should know about modern life is where the Duchesses are; anything else is quite demoralizing.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Do you mean to say you have not read "The Times's" leading articles on Robert Chiltern's career?

LORD GORING

Good heavens! No. What does it say?

LORD CAVERSHAM

What should it say, sir? Everything complimentary, of course. Chiltern's speech last night on this Argentine Canal Scheme was one of the finest pieces of oratory ever delivered in the House since Canning.

LORD GORING

Ah! Never heard of Canning. Never wanted to. And did . . . did Chiltern uphold the scheme?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Uphold it, sir? How little you know him! Why, he denounced it roundly, and the whole system of modern political finance. This speech is the turning-point in his career, as "The Times" points out. You should read this article sir. [*Opens "The Times."*] "Sir Robert

Chiltern . . . most rising of all our young statesmen . . . Brilliant orator . . . Unblemished career . . . Well-known integrity of character . . . Represents what is best in English public life . . . Noble contrast to the lax morality so common among foreign politicians." They will never say that of you, sir.

LORD GORING

I sincerely hope not, father. However, I am delighted at what you tell me about Robert, thoroughly delighted. It shows he has got pluck.

LORD CAVERSHAM

He has got more than pluck, sir, he has got genius.

LORD GORING

Ah! I prefer pluck. It is not so common, nowadays, as genius is.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I wish you would go into Parliament?

LORD GORING

My dear father, only people who look dull

ever get into the House of Commons, and only people who are dull ever succeed there.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Why don't you try to do something useful in life?

LORD GORING

I am far too young.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Testily.*] I hate this affectation of youth, sir. It is a great deal too prevalent nowadays.

LORD GORING

Youth isn't an affectation. Youth is an art.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Why don't you propose to that pretty Miss Chiltern?

LORD GORING

I am of a very nervous disposition, especially in the morning.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I don't suppose there is the smallest chance of her accepting you.

LORD GORING

I don't know how the betting stands to-day.

LORD CAVERSHAM

If she did accept you she would be the prettiest fool in England.

LORD GORING

That is just what I should like to marry. A thoroughly sensible wife would reduce me to a condition of absolute idiocy in less than six months.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You don't deserve her, sir.

LORD GORING

My dear father, if we men married the women we deserved, we should have a very bad time of it.

[*Enter Mabel Chiltern.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! . . . How do you do, Lord Caversham? I hope Lady Caversham is quite well?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Lady Caversham is as usual, as usual.

LORD GORING

Good morning, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Taking no notice at all of Lord Goring, and addressing herself exclusively to Lord Caversham.*] And Lady Caversham's bonnets . . . are they at all better?

LORD CAVERSHAM

They have had a serious relapse, I am sorry to say.

LORD GORING

Good morning, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*To Lord Caversham.*] I hope an operation will not be necessary.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Smiling at her pertness.*] If it is we shall have to give Lady Caversham a narcotic. Otherwise she would never consent to have a feather touched.

LORD GORING

[*With increased emphasis.*] Good morning, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Turning round with feigned surprise.*] Oh, are you here? Of course you understand that after your breaking your appointment I am never going to speak to you again.

LORD GORING

Oh, please don't say such a thing. You are the one person in London I really like to have to listen to me.

MABEL CHILTERN

Lord Goring, I never believe a single word that either you or I say to each other.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You are quite right, my dear, quite right . . . as far as he is concerned, I mean.

MABEL CHILTERN

Do you think you could possibly make your son behave a little better occasionally? Just as a change.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I regret to say, Miss Chiltern, that I have no influence at all over my son. I wish I had. If I had, I know what I would make him do.

MABEL CHILTERN

I am afraid that he has one of those terribly weak natures that are not susceptible to influence.

LORD CAVERSHAM

He is very heartless, very heartless.

LORD GORING

It seems to me that I am a little in the way here.

MABEL CHILTERN

It is very good for you to be in the way, and to know what people say of you behind your back.

LORD GORING

I don't at all like knowing what people say of me behind my back. It makes me far too conceited.

LORD CAVERSHAM

After that, my dear, I really must bid you good morning.

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! I hope you are not going to leave me all alone with Lord Goring? Especially at such an early hour in the day.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I am afraid I can't take him with me to Downing Street. It is not the Prime Minister's day for seeing the unemployed.

[*Shakes hands with Mabel Chiltern, takes up his hat and stick, and goes out, with a parting glare of indignation at Lord Goring.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Takes up roses and begins to arrange them in a bowl on the table.*] People who don't keep their appointments in the Park are horrid.

LORD GORING

Detestable.

MABEL CHILTERN

I am glad you admit it. But I wish you wouldn't look so pleased about it.

LORD GORING

I can't help it. I always look pleased when I am with you.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Sadly.*] Then I suppose it is my duty to remain with you?

LORD GORING

Of course it is.

MABEL CHILTERN

Well, my duty is a thing I never do, on principle. It always depresses me. So I am afraid I must leave you.

LORD GORING

Please don't, Miss Mabel. I have something very particular to say to you.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Rapturously.*] Oh! is it a proposal?

LORD GORING

[*Somewhat taken aback.*] Well, yes, it is—I am bound to say it is.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a sigh of pleasure.*] I am so glad. That makes the second to-day.

LORD GORING

[*Indignantly.*] The second to-day? What conceited ass has been impertinent enough to dare to propose to you before I had proposed to you?

MABEL CHILTERN

Tommy Trafford, of course. It is one of Tommy's days for proposing. He always proposes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, during the season.

LORD GORING

You didn't accept him, I hope?

MABEL CHILTERN

I make it a rule never to accept Tommy. That is why he goes on proposing. Of course, as you didn't turn up this morning, I very nearly said yes. It would have been an excellent lesson both for him and for you if I had. It would have taught you both better manners.

LORD GORING

Oh! bother Tommy Trafford. Tommy is a silly little ass. I love you.

MABEL CHILTERN

I know. And I think you might have mentioned it before. I am sure I have given you heaps of opportunities.

LORD GORING

Mabel, do be serious. Please be serious.

MABEL CHILTERN

Ah! that is the sort of thing a man always says to a girl before he has been married to her. He never says it afterwards.

LORD GORING

[*Taking hold of her hand.*] Mabel, I have told you that I love you. Can't you love me a little in return?

MABEL CHILTERN

You silly Arthur! If you knew anything about . . . anything, which you don't, you would know that I adore you. Everyone in London knows it exeept you. It is a public seandal the way I adore you. I have been going

about for the last six months telling the whole of society that I adore you. I wonder you consent to have anything to say to me. I have no character left at all. At least, I feel so happy that I am quite sure I have no character left at all.

LORD GORING

[*Catches her in his arms and kisses her. Then there is a pause of bliss.*] Dear! Do you know I was awfully afraid of being refused!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Looking up at him.*] But you never have been refused yet by anybody, have you, Arthur? I can't imagine anyone refusing you.

LORD GORING

[*After kissing her again.*] Of course I'm not nearly good enough for you, Mabel.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Nestling close to him.*] I am so glad, darling. I was afraid you were.

LORD GORING

[*After some hesitation.*] And I'm . . . I'm a little over thirty.

MABEL CHILTERN

Dear, you look weeks younger that that.

LORD GORING

[*Enthusiastically.*] How sweet of you to say so! . . . And it is only fair to tell you frankly that I am fearfully extravagant.

MABEL CHILTERN

But so am I, Arthur. So we're sure to agree. And now I must go and see Gertrude.

LORD GORING

Must you really? [*Kisses her.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Yes.

LORD GORING

Then do tell her I want to talk to her particularly. I have been waiting here all the morning to see either her or Robert.

MABEL CHILTERN

Do you mean to say you didn't come here expressly to propose to me?

LORD GORING

[*Triumphantly.*] No, that was a flash of genius.

MABEL CHILTERN

Your first.

LORD GORING

[*With determination.*] My last.

MABEL CHILTERN

I am delighted to hear it. Now don't stir. I'll be back in five minutes. And don't fall into any temptations while I am away.

LORD GORING

Dear Mabel, while you are away, there are none. It makes me horribly dependent on you.

[*Enter Lady Chiltern.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Good morning, dear. How pretty you are looking!

MABEL CHILTERN

How pale you are looking, Gertrude! It is most becoming!

LADY CHILTERN

Good morning, Lord Goring!

LORD GORING

[*Bowing.*] Good morning, Lady Chiltern!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Aside to Lord Goring.*] I shall be in the conservatory, under the second palm tree on the left.

LORD GORING

Second on the left?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a look of mock surprise.*] Yes; the usual palm tree.

[*Blows a kiss to him, unobserved by Lady Chiltern, and goes out.*]

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern, I have a certain amount of very good news to tell you. Mrs. Cheveley gave me up Robert's letter last night, and I burned it. Robert is safe.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Sinking on the sofa.*] Safe! Oh! I am

so glad of that. What a good friend you are to him—to us!

LORD GORING

There is only one person now that could be said to be in any danger.

LADY CHILTERN

Who is that?

LORD GORING

[*Sitting down beside her.*] Yourself.

LADY CHILTERN

I! In danger? What do you mean?

LORD GORING

Danger is too great a word. It is a word I should not have used. But I admit I have something to tell you that may distress you, that terribly distresses me. Yesterday evening you wrote me a very beautiful, womanly letter, asking me for my help. You wrote to me as one of your oldest friends, one of your husband's oldest friends. Mrs. Cheveley stole that letter from my rooms.

LADY CHILTERN

Well, what use is it to her? Why should she not have it?

LORD GORING

[*Rising.*] Lady Chiltern, I will be quite frank with you. Mrs. Cheveley puts a certain construction on that letter and proposes to send it to your husband.

LADY CHILTERN

But what construction could she put on it? . . . Oh! not that! not that! If I in—in trouble, and wanting your help, trusting you, propose to come to you . . . that you may advise me . . . assist me . . . Oh! are there women so horrible as that . . . ? And she proposes to send it to my husband? Tell me what happened. Tell me all that happened.

LORD GORING

Mrs. Cheveley was concealed in a room adjoining my library, without my knowledge. I thought that the person who was waiting in that room to see me was yourself. Robert came in unexpectedly. A chair or something fell in the room. He forced his way in, and he discovered her. We had a terrible scene. I still thought

it was you. He left me in anger. At the end of everything Mrs. Cheveley got possession of your letter—she stole it, when or how, I don't know.

LADY CHILTERN

At what hour did this happen?

LORD GORING

At half-past ten. And now I propose that we tell Robert the whole thing at once.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Looking at him with amazement that is almost terror.*] You want me to tell Robert that the woman you expected was not Mrs. Cheveley, but myself? That it was I whom you thought was concealed in a room in your house, at half-past ten o'clock at night? You want me to tell him that?

LORD GORING

I think it is better that he should know the exact truth.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] Oh, I couldn't, I couldn't!

LORD GORING

May I do it?

LADY CHILTERN

No.

LORD GORING

[*Gravely.*] You are wrong, Lady Chiltern.

LADY CHILTERN

No. The letter must be intercepted. That is all. But how can I do it? Letters arrive for him every moment of the day. His secretaries open them and hand them to him. I dare not ask the servants to bring me his letters. It would be impossible. Oh! why don't you tell me what to do?

LORD GORING

Pray be calm, Lady Chiltern, and answer the questions I am going to put to you. You said his secretaries open his letters.

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

LORD GORING

Who is with him to-day? Mr. Trafford, isn't it?

LADY CHILTERN

No. Mr. Montfort, I think.

LORD GORING

You can trust him?

LADY CHILTERN

[*With a gesture of despair.*] Oh! how do I know?

LORD GORING

He would do what you asked him, wouldn't he?

LADY CHILTERN

I think so.

LORD GORING

Your letter was on pink paper. He could recognize it without reading it, couldn't he? By the colour?

LADY CHILTERN

I suppose so.

LORD GORING

Is he in the house now?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

LORD GORING

Then I will go and see him myself, and tell him that a certain letter, written on pink paper, is to be forwarded to Robert to-day, and that at all costs it must not reach him. [*Goes to the door, and opens it.*] Oh! Robert is coming upstairs with the letter in his hand. It has reached him already.

LADY CHILTERN

[*With a cry of pain.*] Oh! you have saved his life; what have you done with mine!

[*Enter Sir Robert Chiltern. He has the letter in his hand, and is reading it. He comes towards his wife, not noticing Lord Goring's presence.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

"I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude." Oh, my love! Is this true? Do you indeed trust me, and want me? If so, it was for me to come to you, not for you to

write of coming to me. This letter of yours, Gertrude, makes me feel that nothing that the world may do can hurt me now. You want me, Gertrude?

[*Lord Goring, unseen by Sir Robert Chiltern, makes an imploring sign to Lady Chiltern to accept the situation and Sir Robert's error.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You trust me, Gertrude?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Ah! why did you not add you loved me?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Taking his hand.*] Because I loved you.

[*Lord Goring passes into the conservatory.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Kisses her.*] Gertrude, you don't know what I feel. When Montfort passed me your letter across the table—he had opened it by mistake,

I suppose, without looking at the handwriting on the envelope—and I read it—oh! I did not care what disgrace or punishment was in store for me, I only thought you loved me still.

LADY CHILTERN

There is no disgrace in store for you, nor any public shame. Mrs. Cheveley has handed over to Lord Goring the document that was in her possession, and he has destroyed it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Are you sure of this, Gertrude?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes; Lord Goring has just told me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Then I am safe! Oh! what a wonderful thing to be safe! For two days I have been in terror. I am safe now. How did Arthur destroy my letter? Tell me.

LADY CHILTERN

He burned it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I wish I had seen that one sin of my youth

burning to ashes. How many men there are in modern life who would like to see their past burning to white ashes before them! Is Arthur still here?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes; he is in the conservatory.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am so glad now I made that speech last night in the House, so glad. I made it thinking that public disgrace might be the result. But it has not been so.

LADY CHILTERN

Public honour has been the result.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I think so. I fear so, almost. For although I am safe from detection, although every proof against me is destroyed, I suppose, Gertrude . . . I suppose I should retire from public life? [*He looks anxiously at his wife.*]

LADY CHILTERN

[*Eagerly.*] Oh yes, Robert, you should do that. It is your duty to do that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It is much to surrender.

LADY CHILTERN

No; it will be much to gain.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern walks up and down the room with a troubled expression. Then comes over to his wife, and puts his hand on her shoulder.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And you would be happy living somewhere alone with me, abroad perhaps, or in the country away from London, away from public life? You would have no regrets?

LADY CHILTERN

Oh! none, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Sadly.*] And your ambition for me? You used to be ambitious for me.

LADY CHILTERN

Oh! my ambition! I have none now, but that we two may love each other. It was your ambition that led you astray. Let us not talk about ambition.

[*Lord Goring returns from the conservatory, looking very pleased with himself, and with an entirely new buttonhole that some one has made for him.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Going towards him.*] Arthur, I have to thank you for what you have done for me. I don't know how I can repay you. [*Shakes hands with him.*]

LORD GORING

My dear fellow, I'll tell you at once. At the present moment, under the usual palm tree . . . I mean in the conservatory . . .

[*Enter Mason.*]

MASON

Lord Caversham.

LORD GORING

That admirable father of mine really makes a habit of turning up at the wrong moment. It is very heartless of him, very heartless indeed.

[*Enter Lord Caversham. Mason goes out.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Good morning, Lady Chiltern! Warmest con-

gratulations to you, Chiltern, on your brilliant speech last night. I have just left the Prime Minister, and you are to have the vacant seat in the Cabinet.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a look of joy and triumph.*] A seat in the Cabinet?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Yes; here is the Prime Minister's letter. [*Hands letter.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Takes letter and reads.*] A seat in the Cabinet!

LORD CAVERSHAM

Certainly, and you well deserve it too. You have got what we want so much in political life nowadays—high character, high moral tone, high principles. [*To Lord Goring.*] Everything that you have not got, sir, and never will have.

LORD GORING

I don't like principles, father, I prefer prejudices.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern is on the brink of accepting the Prime Minister's offer, when he sees his wife looking at him with her clear, candid eyes. He then realizes that it is impossible.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I cannot accept this offer, Lord Caversham. I have made up my mind to decline it.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Decline it, sir!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My intention is to retire at once from public life.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Angrily.*] Decline a seat in the Cabinet, and retire from public life? Never heard such damned nonsense in the whole course of my existence. I beg your pardon, Lady Chiltern. Chiltern, I beg your pardon. [*To Lord Goring.*] Don't grin like that, sir.

LORD GORING

No, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Lady Chiltern, you are a sensible woman, the

most sensible woman in London, the most sensible woman I know. Will you kindly prevent your husband from making such a . . . from talking such . . . Will you kindly do that, Lady Chiltern?

LADY CHILTERN

I think my husband is right in his determination, Lord Caversham. I approve of it.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You approve of it? Good Heavens!

LADY CHILTERN

[*Taking her husband's hand.*] I admire him for it. I admire him immensely for it. I have never admired him so much before. He is finer than even I thought him. [*To Sir Robert Chiltern.*] You will go and write your letter to the Prime Minister now, won't you? Don't hesitate about it, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a touch of bitterness.*] I suppose I had better write it at once. Such offers are not repeated. I will ask you to excuse me for a moment, Lord Caversham.

LADY CHILTERN

I may come with you, Robert, may I not?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes, Gertrude.

[*Lady Chiltern goes out with him.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

What is the matter with this family? Something wrong here, eh? [*Tapping his forehead.*] Idiocy? Hereditary, I suppose. Both of them, too. Wife as well as husband. Very sad. Very sad indeed! And they are not an old family. Can't understand it.

LORD GORING

It is not idiocy, father, I assure you.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What is it then, sir?

LORD GORING

[*After some hesitation.*] Well, it is what is called nowadays a high moral tone, father. That is all.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Hate these new-fangled names. Same thing

as we used to call idiocy fifty years ago. Shan't stay in this house any longer.

LORD GORING

[*Taking his arm.*] Oh! just go in here for a moment, father. Third palm tree to the left, the usual palm tree.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What, sir?

LORD GORING

I beg your pardon, father, I forgot. The conservatory, father, the conservatory—there is some one there I want you to talk to.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What about, sir?

LORD GORING

About me, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Grimly.*] Not a subject on which much eloquence is possible.

LORD GORING

No, father; but the lady is like me. She

doesn't care much for eloquence in others. She thinks it a little loud.

[*Lord Caversham goes into the conservatory. Lady Chiltern enters.*]

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern, why are you playing Mrs. Cheveley's cards?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Startled.*] I don't understand you.

LORD GORING

Mrs. Cheveley made an attempt to ruin your husband. Either to drive him from public life, or to make him adopt a dishonourable position. From the latter tragedy you saved him. The former you are now thrusting on him. Why should you do him the wrong Mrs. Cheveley tried to do and failed?

LADY CHILTERN

Lord Goring?

LORD GORING

[*Pulling himself together for a great effort, and showing the philosopher that underlies the dandy.*] Lady Chiltern, allow me. You wrote

me a letter last night in which you said you trusted me and wanted my help. Now is the moment when you really want my help, now is the time when you have got to trust me, to trust in my counsel and judgment. You love Robert. Do you want to kill his love for you? What sort of existence will he have if you rob him of the fruits of his ambition, if you take him from the splendour of a great political career, if you close the doors of public life against him, if you condemn him to sterile failure, he who was made for triumph and success? Women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission. Why should you scourge him with rods for a sin done in his youth, before he knew you, before he knew himself? A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. Don't make any terrible mistake, Lady Chiltern. A woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Troubled and hesitating.*] But it is my husband himself who wishes to retire from public life. He feels it is his duty. It was he who first said so.

LORD GORING

Rather than lose your love, Robert would do anything, wreck his whole career, as he is on the brink of doing now. He is making for you a terrible sacrifice. Take my advice, Lady Chiltern, and do not accept a sacrifice so great. If you do, you will live to repent it bitterly. We men and women are not made to accept such sacrifices from each other. We are not worthy of them. Besides, Robert has been punished enough.

LADY CHILTERN

We have both been punished. I set him up too high.

LORD GORING

[*With deep feeling in his voice.*] Do not for that reason set him down now too low. If he has fallen from his altar, do not thrust him into the mire. Failure to Robert would be the very

mire of shame. Power is his passion. He would lose everything, even his power to feel love. Your husband's life is at this moment in your hands, your husband's love is in your hands. Don't mar both for him.

[*Enter Sir Robert Chiltern.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude, here is the draft of my letter. Shall I read it to you?

LADY CHILTERN

Let me see it.

[*Sir Robert hands her the letter. She reads it, and then, with a gesture of passion, tears it up.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What are you doing?

LADY CHILTERN

A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. I have just learnt this, and much else with it, from Lord Goring. And I will not

spoil your life for you, nor see you spoil it as a sacrifice to me, a useless sacrifice!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude! Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

You can forget. Men easily forget. And I forgive. That is how women help the world. I see that now.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Deeply overcome by emotion, embraces her.*] My wife! my wife! [*To Lord Goring.*] Arthur, it seems that I am always to be in your debt.

LORD GORING

Oh, dear no, Robert! Your debt is to Lady Chiltern, not to me!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I owe you much. And now tell me what you were going to ask me just now as Lord Caversham came in.

LORD GORING

Robert, you are your sister's guardian, and I want your consent to my marriage with her. That is all.

LADY CHILTERN

Oh, I am so glad! I am so glad! [*Shakes hands with Lord Goring.*]

LORD GORING

Thank you, Lady Chiltern.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a troubled look.*] My sister to be your wife?

LORD GORING

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Speaking with great firmness.*] Arthur, I am very sorry, but the thing it quite out of the question. I have to think of Mabel's future happiness. And I don't think her happiness would be safe in your hands. And I cannot have her sacrificed!

LORD GORING

Sacrificed!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes, utterly sacrificed. Loveless marriages are horrible. But there is one thing worse than

an absolutely loveless marriage. A marriage in which there is love, but on one side only; faith, but on one side only; devotion, but on one side only, and in which of the two hearts one is sure to be broken.

LORD GORING

But I love Mabel. No other woman has any place in my life.

LADY CHILTERN

Robert, if they love each other, why should they not be married?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur cannot bring Mabel the love that she deserves.

LORD GORING

What reason have you for saying that?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*After a pause.*] Do you really require me to tell you?

LORD GORING

Certainly I do.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

As you choose. When I called on you yesterday evening I found Mrs. Cheveley concealed in your rooms. It was between ten and eleven o'clock at night. I do not wish to say anything more. Your relations with Mrs. Cheveley have as I said to you last night, nothing whatsoever to do with me. I know you were engaged to be married to her once. The fascination she exercised over you then seems to have returned. You spoke to me last night of her as of a woman pure and stainless, a woman whom you respected and honoured. That may be so. But I cannot give my sister's life into your hands. It would be wrong of me. It would be unjust, infamously unjust to her.

LORD GORING

I have nothing more to say.

LADY CHILTERN

Robert, it was not Mrs. Cheveley whom Lord Goring expected last night.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Not Mrs. Cheveley! Who was it then?

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern.

LADY CHILTERN

It was your own wife. Robert, yesterday afternoon Lord Goring told me that if ever I was in trouble I could come to him for help, as he was our oldest and best friend. Later on, after that terrible scene in this room, I wrote to him telling him that I trusted him, that I had need of him, that I was coming to him for help and advice. [*Sir Robert Chiltern takes the letter out of his pocket.*] Yes, that letter. I didn't go to Lord Goring's after all. I felt that it is from ourselves alone that help can come. Pride made me think that. Mrs. Cheveley went. She stole my letter and sent it anonymously to you this morning, that you should think . . . Oh! Robert, I cannot tell you what she wished you to think. . . .

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What! Had I fallen so low in your eyes that you thought that even for a moment I could have doubted your goodness? Gertrude, Gertrude, you are to me the white image of all good things, and sin can never touch you. Arthur,

you can go to Mabel, and you have my best wishes! Oh! stop a moment. There is no name at the beginning of this letter. The brilliant Mrs. Cheveley does not seem to have noticed that. There should be a name.

LADY CHILTERN

Let me write yours. It is you I trust and need. You and none else.

LORD GORING

Well, really, Lady Chiltern, I think I should have back my own letter.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Smiling.*] No; you shall have Mabel. [*Takes the letter and writes her husband's name on it.*]

LORD GORING

Well, I hope she hasn't changed her mind. It's nearly twenty minutes since I saw her last.

[*Enter Mabel Chiltern and Lord Caversham.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Lord Goring, I think your father's conversation much more improving than yours. I am only going to talk to Lord Caversham in the future, and always under the usual palm tree.

LORD GORING

Darling! [*Kisses her.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Considerably taken aback.*] What does this mean, sir? You don't mean to say that this charming, clever young lady, has been so foolish as to accept you?

LORD GORING

Certainly, father! And Chiltern's been wise enough to accept the seat in the Cabinet.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I am very glad to hear that, Chiltern . . . I congratulate you, sir. If the country doesn't go to the dogs or the Radicals, we shall have you Prime Minister, some day.

[*Enter Mason.*]

MASON

Luncheon is on the table, my Lady!

[*Mason goes out.*]

LADY CHILTERN

You'll stop to luncheon, Lord Caversham, won't you?

LORD CAVERSHAM

With pleasure, and I'll drive you down to Downing Street afterwards, Chiltern. You have a great future before you, a great future. Wish I could say the same for you, sir. [*To Lord Goring.*] But your career will have to be entirely domestic.

LORD GORING

Yes, father, I prefer it domestic.

LORD CAVERSHAM

And if you don't make this young lady an ideal husband, I'll cut you off with a shilling.

MABEL CHILTERN

An ideal husband! Oh, I don't think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What do you want him to be then, dear?

MABEL CHILTERN

He can be what he chooses. All I want is to be . . . to be . . . oh! a real wife to him.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Upon my word, there is a good deal of common sense in that, Lady Chiltern.

[*They all go out except Sir Robert Chiltern. He sinks into a chair, wrapt in thought. After a little time Lady Chiltern returns to look for him.*]

LADY CHILTERN

[*Leaning over the back of the chair.*] Aren't you coming in, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Taking her hand.*] Gertrude, is it love you feel for me, or is it pity merely?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Kisses him.*] It is love, Robert. Love, and only love. For both of us a new life is beginning.

CURTAIN.

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